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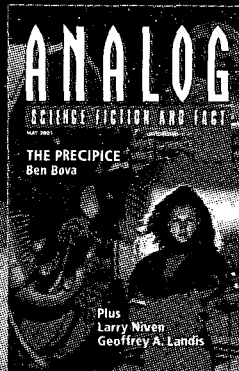
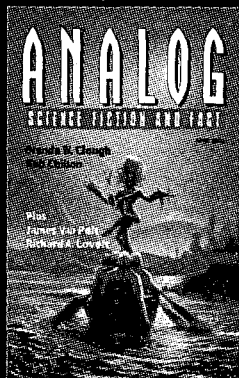
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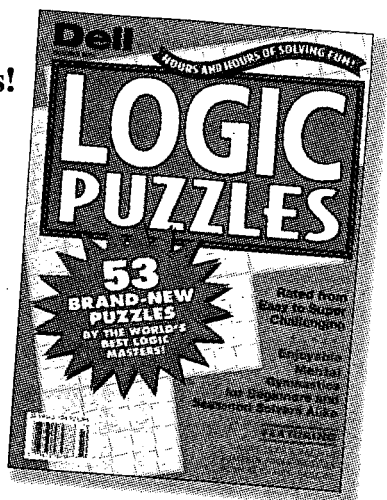
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Linda Landrigan

Gossip is the currency of the information age. It sells magazines and television shows, and sometimes passes for journalism. A little gossip in the workplace binds friends and guides behavior. But while it's true you can learn a lot around the water cooler, B. K. Stevens explores the perils of loose lips in "Death of the Guilty Party." In this new story, Leah Abrams returns, hard at work on her book *A Hermeneutics of Workplace Communication: Optimal Cohort Actualization Through Strategic Intimacy Enhancement and Reverse Distancing Behaviors*. Mrs. Stevens's story is a bit of a morality tale with some timeless advice for the new century.

Mrs. Stevens has been publishing comic whodunits with AHMM since 1988. Once a part-time college professor (she has a Ph.D. in

English from Boston College), she turned to writing mysteries "as a kind of therapy, a way of using a part of my mind that I couldn't in my job." In addition to the Leah Abrams stories, Mrs. Stevens has two other continuing series that portray sensitive, individual dynamics between characters while they unravel a mystery. Her stories featuring Lieutenant Walter Johnson and Sergeant Gordon Bolt, and those featuring police detective turned P.I. Iphegenia Woodhouse, have also appeared in these pages. Her Leah Adams character is loosely autobiographical—though, says Mrs. Stevens, "I hope I'm not that pretentious." Both Iphegenia and Leah also have very real family obligations, setting them apart from the model of the female detective as an independent figure.

(continued on page 144)

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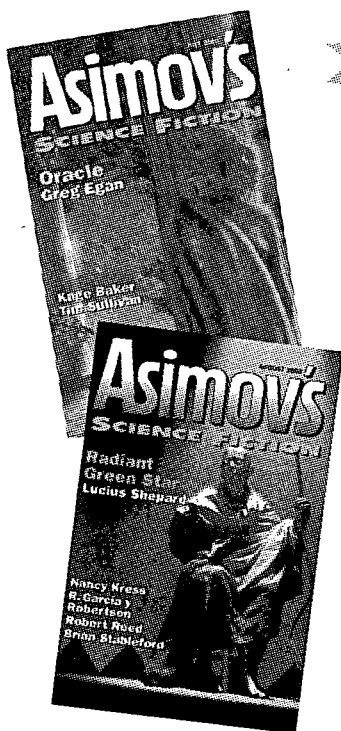
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FICTION

BOOT SCOOT

Diana Deverell

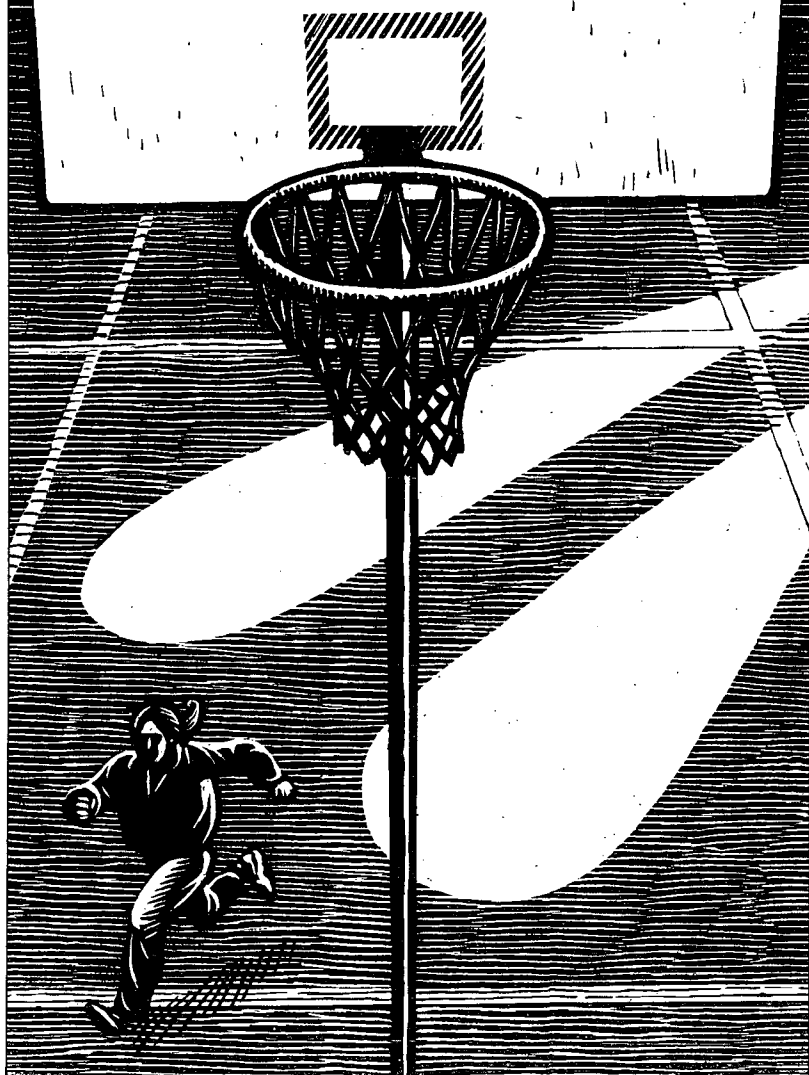


Illustration by Dan Krovatín

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/02

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An FBI Special Agent—even one on leave, celebrating Christmas in her old hometown—is not going to let some lowlife mess with *her* family. A strange man follows Dawna Shepherd's little brother two hundred and twelve miles across West Texas, of course she'll stop the jerk cold at the Shepherd front door.

But when Dawna yanked open the door to the chill December evening, the light from the electric icicles glinted off a golden seven-pointed star. She realized her visitor was holding up a badge case.

"Team Leader Tommy O'Brien," the man said. "Official business."

A man with New York City in his voice has official business in Amity, Texas?

Curious, Dawna kept her mouth shut, studied her visitor. O'Brien was her height—six-three. Thick through the torso but not fat. In his forties, about ten years older than she was, time etching a trio of lines across his forehead. His Irish blue eyes were so deep set they looked as if they'd been smudged in with a sooty finger. Dawna was a sucker for eyes like that. But O'Brien's appeal was negated by the ready-to-jump alertness in his posture. Ten seconds, he'd be threatening to put cuffs on her. Another rush of adrenaline hit her bloodstream, an instinctive reaction to the menace coming off O'Brien as strongly as a bad scent. She squinted to read the print on his badge: FUGITIVE RECOVERY TEAM.

"A bounty hunter," Dawna said flatly. She kept on her game face, stern and impassive, her body blocking the doorway. Fugitive recovery agents had the legal right to pursue bail jumpers across state lines, but they worked for bail bondsmen, not law enforcement. So O'Brien wasn't all *that* official. And he wasn't all that bright, either. What fugitive did he think he'd find in the home of Police Chief Donald Raymond Shepherd, Dawna's father? "Who you huntin'?" she asked.

"Astrid Anderson." O'Brien brushed a thick lock of dark hair off his forehead and held up a mockup of a wanted poster in his left hand. His right fell casually to rest on the extension baton tucked into his belt. He wore leather gloves, the fingerless version preferred by serious shooters.

Dawna plucked the poster from his hand, hiding her shock. She knew the pallid girl pictured there. Baby-fine ash-blonde hair skinned back in a ponytail that emphasized the high hairline, the pale streaks of her eyebrows blending into the shiny whiteness of the broad forehead. The young woman was Bailey Winters—the same Bailey Winters who'd hurried into the house only minutes before with Dawna's brother Zane. Both seniors at Texas Tech, the two now huddled in the kitchen, waiting for Dawna to handle the man who'd followed them from Lubbock to Amity.

But the pictured woman could-

n't be Bailey, Dawna realized. Astrid Anderson was wanted for a murder in connection with the robbery of a Bronx savings bank in 1971, nine years before Bailey was born. "You got the wrong house," Dawna said to O'Brien. "There's no Astrid Anderson here."

"Jane Winters, then. That's the name Anderson may be using now."

Bailey's mother? Dawna shook her head, vibrating her tumble of blonde curls. "Not possible."

O'Brien folded his arms, the ends of his fingers bluntly pink against the dark leather of his jacket. "Jane Winters was born March 14, 1950, in Eugene, Oregon. Got a driver's license in Odessa, Texas, in 1978. During that twenty-eight year gap, she had no driver's license, never held a job, never filed an income tax return, never owned a credit card, and never borrowed money. Makes me want to ask Jane Winters what she was doing between 1950 and 1978. And since Bailey Winters came straight to this house, I thought I might find her mother here."

"You didn't." Dawna's basketball instincts kicked in. The other team comes at you suddenly with a strategy you've never seen before, you don't try to guess how to respond. You get control of the ball, call a time-out, analyze the play. Dawna pushed the door shut and slammed the deadbolt home.

O'Brien spoke loudly from the other side. "Ma'am, there's a very

serious charge against Astrid Anderson. Really, you don't want to find yourself aiding and abetting a murderer. You think about it. I'll be in town till I get some answers. You want to talk to me, you got my cell phone number right there."

Dawna waited, her back against the door, until she heard O'Brien step off the front porch.

Then she was brushing past the darkened Christmas tree, pushing through the swing door into the kitchen, jerking the cell phone out of Bailey's hand, shutting *that* down.

Bailey backed herself up against the Formica-topped counter. Her lanky frame seemed to shrink inside her baggy warm-ups, the ketchup-red pants riding low on her narrow hips. She held her hand out to Dawna, begging for the phone back. "I got to talk to my mom."

"That's what he wants you to do," Dawna said. "He's outside right now scanning cell-phone conversations, waiting to listen in."

Zane snorted and moved closer to Bailey. "You don't know that." The shortest of the Shepherd family—only five feet nine—and the darkest, he flanked Bailey like a stunted shadow.

"He's a bounty hunter, that's how they work." How we all work when we're hunting, Dawna amended to herself. Right after denying knowledge of a fugitive's whereabouts, a liar invariably tries to warn the fugitive of what's going down. Listen in on

that call, you can often locate the person you're looking for.

Shoot, what was Dawna doing, interfering with the lawful apprehension of a fugitive from justice? An FBI agent, she couldn't obstruct O'Brien just because her unreasonable gut told her he was a dangerous threat.

She moved an egg-stained plate from the table to the sink and sank into a chair. She'd been finishing her supper when Zane and Bailey arrived and the kitchen smelled of bacon.

Bailey dropped into the chair across from Dawna. The younger girl's skin had grown translucent and a blue vein sliced across her forehead like a scar. "He's made a mistake, right?"

"He must have," Zane said, joining them at the table. Even in mid-December, his complexion stayed dark and his teeth gleamed in the center of his tan face. "Jane never killed anyone."

Dawna's eyes flicked to the poster. Astrid Anderson hadn't killed anyone, either. She hadn't even been inside the Bronx bank when one of her partners shot a guard. But she'd driven the getaway car. And as soon as she'd been released on bail, she'd disappeared. Dawna's glance went from the poster to Bailey, then back again. Virtual twins. No wonder O'Brien was already counting the bounty money offered by the bondsman.

"Start at the beginning," Dawna said to Bailey. "Tell me how this O'Brien got on your tail. When did he contact you?"

"Two weeks ago. In New York."

Bailey played basketball for Texas Tech. A shooting guard, she was hitting forty-eight percent from beyond the arc, on her way to setting a new school record for three-pointers. Dawna knew that during the first week of December, the Lady Raiders had preseason contests at Manhattan College and Fordham University.

"He caught up with me after we beat the Jaspers," Bailey continued. "He *said* he was a sports reporter. And he asked all the right questions about my game. And then he wanted Texas color. You know, I'm a Texan, what about my folks and their folks and all that. So I told him, like there's no story there. My mom's folks are dead, I never knew my father. There's just her and me and neither of us was born in Texas."

Single mother, drifted into town, bought the Amity Cafe—that was all Dawna knew about Jane Winters, too. Which was odd, when she thought about it. The summer Dawna was thirteen, Jane had just opened the cafe and was building up her lunch trade. She'd hired Dawna to baby-sit Bailey, which meant taking her to the city playground in the morning and the city pool in the afternoon. Dawna was already crazy about hoops, and she'd given Bailey her first taste of the game in baby-sized morning workouts. Afternoons, Dawna had brought three-year-old Zane along to the pool; he and Bailey had been best friends ever since.

And in eighteen years of casu-

al conversation, Dawna had picked up virtually nothing about Jane's past. Just a vague sense that some disaster—a house fire?—had wiped out Jane's parents and all souvenirs of her youth. It was the kind of vagueness that would interest a bounty hunter.

"O'Brien came back," Dawna said to Bailey.

The younger woman ducked her head in agreement. "Two nights later, after we lost to Fordham. Said he wanted to check his facts. But this time, he knew a bunch of stuff I hadn't told him. And he was wanting more. Like my mailing address is just a rural route number so where do I actually live? I kind of brushed him off. And then he starts in on my mom. What's she do for a living, how old is she, do I take after her? I stopped it right there, it was just too weird. I told him we don't look a bit alike and I headed for the locker room."

"There's no resemblance." Zane glared at Dawna, daring her to disagree.

But Dawna was already touching up her mental picture of Jane, cutting the bangs, lightening the hair, looking for Astrid Anderson in the familiar face. Because all the other facts fit too damn well. The Fugitive Recovery Team leader must have reached the same conclusion. "O'Brien came to Lubbock," she said.

"I didn't know what he wanted exactly. Just that it had to do with my mother. I refused to meet with him. But he hung

around outside my dorm. He followed me to class. Not making any threats or anything. But he was just there. All I wanted to do was take my last exam and get out of Lubbock."

Purposely spooking the girl so she'd run. So close to Christmas, he would have expected her to go to Jane. For a man who talked like a native New Yorker, following Bailey was a safer strategy than coming direct to Amity and searching for Jane Winters on his own. Bounty hunters who go charging into insular communities have been known to end up dead. Dawna had been home for three days, gossiping with her mother, catching up on everybody's business. If O'Brien had been in Amity, Dawna would've heard about it.

"I didn't know any of that when I picked Bailey up," Zane was saying. "We were halfway here before she told me she recognized the car. He'd been behind me ever since Andrews, but I didn't think anything of it." Zane looked at Dawna from beneath lowered lids, checking to see if she'd chastise him for letting himself be followed—the way their father would have.

Dawna absolved him. "These back roads, hard to tell if somebody's tailing you or just going to the same place." Her gaze moved from Zane to Bailey's face. "And if she hadn't told you about O'Brien . . ."

"You should have," Zane said to Bailey. "When I still could've helped you."

Dawna heard the unspoken ending to the sentence: *without telling my dad or my sister.*

Red circles burned in each of Bailey's cheeks. "But I wanted to tell my mom first."

In Bailey's place, Dawna would've phoned her mother from New York City. Surprised, she asked, "Your mom doesn't know about O'Brien?"

"You think I'd call her up, tell her some man is stalking me?" Bailey shook her head. "She'd go crazy, worrying. Two hundred miles away, how's she supposed to help me?"

"Right," Dawna murmured agreeably. She realized that Bailey had feared from her first encounter with O'Brien that he knew something harmful to Jane Winters. And for reasons Dawna could only guess at, Bailey had decided she had to confront her mother face-to-face. In Lubbock, she'd hugged her secret close, unwilling to reveal to anyone even remotely connected to law enforcement that O'Brien was tracking her movements. But by following her home, he'd forced her hand and she'd had to tell Zane about him.

"By the time I understood what the guy wanted," Zane said, "it was too late to lead him away from Amity. I figured I'd come here and let Dad handle him."

"I didn't want to bother the chief," Bailey said. "But Zane insisted."

"Smart move, choosing not to deal with O'Brien alone," Dawna said to Zane.

"Too bad I forgot Dad was going out tonight."

The police chief and his wife were at the Amity Grange Hall enjoying a banquet honoring the retiring senior deputy. It was the kind of ceremonial event that Dawna hated and she'd wiggled out of her invitation. "Lucky for you I was here," she said.

Bailey looked unhappy, as though she didn't think that finding Dawna home had been so lucky a break. "Really, Dawna, I'm sorry to bother you with this. Thanks for getting rid of him, but I can handle it from here."

"I don't see how. You can't go near your mother." Dawna leaned across the table, intent. "O'Brien's got this place staked out. He's probably got three or four more guys on his team. At least one of them will be on your tail from the minute you leave here."

"But I have to tell her about this," Bailey protested.

"O'Brien wouldn't send his best tracker after me," Dawna said thoughtfully. "I could take Zane's truck, lose the follow car and—"

"No," Bailey hurriedly cut her off. "No thanks, Dawna, but I want to do it."

Dawna got it then. Bailey wasn't letting an FBI agent near her mother.

And Zane was already running the play with her, double-teaming Dawna. "I'll help you," he said eagerly to Bailey. "I can get O'Brien to send someone after us. We lead him out of town. Once we have our tail good and lost, I

shake him. Then we drive to your house." Jane Winters had recently moved to a five-acre ranchette tucked into a grid of farm roads a dozen miles west of Amity.

"Works better if you two stay here and I do it." Dawna kept her voice neutral.

Bailey pushed herself to her feet. "Zane and I will make it work." She was at the back door.

Dawna shook her head. It always surprised her when kids stepped up, trying to protect parents from mistakes made long ago. Not realizing when the mistakes were way too big for little kids to handle.

Bailey believed her mother was the fugitive Astrid Anderson. And Bailey wanted to warn her before any bounty hunters or FBI agents could catch up with her. A loving daughter, Bailey wanted to give Astrid Anderson a chance to start running again.

Zane stopped Bailey as she reached for the door handle. "We got to act sneaky, like we're trying to slip by." He switched off the kitchen light and the outside lamp before he eased the door open and motioned Bailey into the exterior darkness. "Do one little thing for us," he whispered to Dawna. "Go in the front room and get busy, like you're trying to distract him."

"Zane." Telling him with that one word that he was making a mistake.

He ignored her protest. "One little thing," he growled accusingly and pulled the door shut with a decisive click.

Dawna shook her head. Like she had a choice when it came to assisting a criminal flee prosecution. That Zane. He'd always had a crazy romantic streak. She couldn't help but love him for it. Grinning fondly, Dawna pushed through the swing door into the living room. She plugged in the lights on the noble fir and flicked on table lamps at each end of the couch. Standing in front of the picture window, she plumped pillows, inhaling the mingled scents of kapok and evergreen and making sure that anyone watching the house knew precisely which tall, blonde woman was inside.

The dark shadow of Zane's pickup rolled silently along the driveway to her right. No engine, no lights—she figured Zane was behind the car pushing while Bailey steered. As the car slid into the street, the driver's side door popped open. The interior light flashed on Bailey sliding over to make room for Zane as he leaped inside. The door slammed shut, the engine roared, and the truck's taillights disappeared northbound on Hackberry Street.

Headlights blazed in the alley across the street. An olive-green Celica pulled sharply out onto Hackberry and shot after the pickup. O'Brien's team had taken the bait.

Good. Dawna didn't want Jane captured by bounty hunters intent on collecting their pay. They'd rush Jane to New York City as fast as humanly possible. She'd be lucky if she got to use the restroom before her wrist

was cuffed to that of a strange man's and she was hauled to the nearest airport. Such a primitive arrest technique was harsher treatment than Jane deserved.

Dawna felt a hollowness in the pit of her stomach. Her gut was telling her again that O'Brien was as much *her* problem as he was Jane's. Why?

Dawna couldn't worry about that now. She grabbed her parka from the coat closet at the foot of the stairs. She shrugged into it as she hurried back into the kitchen. Zane knew the terrain; he'd need no more than thirty minutes to ditch the Celica. Then he'd take Bailey to her mother, start Astrid Anderson running again. The indigo readout on the microwave clock read 7:27. Would Bailey remember that her mother wasn't home tonight, either? That Jane was catering the police department banquet? Dawna had no time to waste. She had to reach Jane before Bailey did.

She'd have to do it without a car. Dawna's parents had been at opposite ends of the county all day and had traveled to the banquet separately, using both of the family vehicles. Calling a cab wasn't an option. Even if Dawna had been willing to advertise her departure, neither of Amity's lackadaisical taxi firms could get a driver to her house in under fifteen minutes. But Amity was small—only twelve thousand souls—and the Shepherd home was in the southwest quadrant. The grange hall sat on the town's western boundary, no more than

three miles away. Even on foot, Dawna had a good chance of getting to Jane first.

She cracked open the back door as surreptitiously as Zane had. Crouching, she sped across the back lawn and hoisted herself over the fence and into the Moody's yard. She ignored the frenzied barking from inside the house. Deputy Moody was the honored guest at tonight's banquet. Nobody in his family would be home tonight. Staying out of the reddish light cast by the sleigh-and-reindeer display on the front lawn, she hurried down the side yard and turned left on Yucca Street. As soon as she reached the intersection with Alamo Boulevard, she started jogging west. Brown dust puffed from the street at every footfall. Amity was on the high prairie at the northern border of the Chihuahuahua Desert and the air was never free of grit. Above her, the cloudless sky was studded with stars. Her breath fogged in front of her, the temperature hovering at thirty-four, the cold air burning in her lungs.

Dawna sprinted across Park Street. On her right was the city playground. The basketball hoop had lost its net and moonlight glinted off the few spots of paint remaining on the rusted rim. Odd that basketball had turned out to be Jane's downfall, that Bailey's trip to New York had brought Jane's secret past to light.

By seven fifty, Dawna was on the other side of the Pecos Valley

Southern Railroad tracks and heading north on Texas Road. She stayed on the pavement, safe enough when the temperature kept the king snakes snug in their nests instead of out on nocturnal hunts. A fallow cantaloupe patch lay off to her left and she caught a whiff of rotting melon.

Ahead of her, the grange hall was visible from a quarter mile away, every window lit, the white clapboards gleaming like a beacon. Panting, Dawna picked her way through the crowded parking lot. The chief's Crown Vic was parked in the front row. Dawna spotted her mother's black Beemer at the edge of the lot, its "BST BRKR" vanity plates announcing that Nancy Lynn Shepherd had her own real estate agency.

Dawna bypassed the front entrance, heading for the side door. The Amity Cafe catering van sat at the bottom of the porch steps, its rear doors folded back. Dawna was stepping onto the porch when the kitchen door flew open. Steamy air blew across Dawna's face, smelling of dish soap with a lingering hint of freshly baked corn bread. A young Hispanic wrapped in a white apron backed onto the porch, balancing a stack of empty stainless steel pans. Dawna recognized him. Salvador Ramirez had started out washing dishes for Jane Winters and was now her partner in the catering business.

"Hey Sal," Dawna said, grabbing the door to hold it open. "Jane still here?"

"What, not even a *cómo vas, amigo?*" Sal flashed her a smile as he noisily slid the hotel-sized pans into the rack inside the van. "So hungry you forgot your manners, I bet. Go on in, Jane'll fix you a plate."

Did Sal know about Jane? Dawna probed, her tone neutral. "Nobody tell you it's a crime to bribe a federal officer?"

Sal laughed as if she'd made a joke. "Did I say your dinner was free? I don't think so. FBI, we got to charge you double."

Relieved, Dawna said, "Cheap at twice the price," as she stepped into the kitchen. She blinked as her eyes adjusted to the brighter light. The room was empty. She crossed to the door on the opposite side and peeked through. Twenty folding tables crowded the main hall, and forks clinked against dessert plates in a lulling rhythm as a burly man at the podium spoke glowingly of Deputy Moody.

Dawna checked her watch. Seven fifty-five. The banquet was winding down, right on schedule. She spied her parents seated at the head table to the speaker's right. She felt a rush of affection for them both. But the warmth quickly gave way to a chill, that odd hollowness in her gut. Why did she have this strange feeling that she was confronting a major problem? If Dawna busted the woman tonight, fine, she'd score some points, but nobody in the Bureau would blame her if she didn't succeed.

Assigned for the past eighteen

months to Quantico-East, the International Law Enforcement Academy in Budapest, Dawna had routinely reviewed the most-wanted files for fugitives known to be in Europe, but she hadn't looked at the domestic ones. And even if she'd run across a photo of Astrid Anderson, Dawna had encountered Bailey Winters too rarely in recent years to see a resemblance between Bailey at twenty-one and a picture of her mother at the same age. Now that it had been pointed out to her, she was doing her best to check out the situation. That's all the Bureau expected her to do.

Glancing around for Jane Winters, Dawna found her just a few feet away. An industrial-sized urn sat on a cart against the back wall. Jane was beside it, filling a coffee carafe. She passed the carafe to a teenage waitress and rubbed the heel of her hand tiredly along her hairline, shoving the sweat-matted bangs off her face. Then Jane registered Dawna's presence in the kitchen doorway and smiled a hello. Jane's hair was grayer than Dawna remembered, and with her broad forehead exposed, she was unmistakably an older version of the wanted woman.

Dawna kept her body between Jane and the exit as she approached the other woman. When her left hand closed around Jane's forearm, the white fabric of the chef's jacket was smooth against her fingertips.

Jane glanced down at the hand on her arm, then back at Dawna,

her expression wary. As if she knew what was coming.

"Bounty hunter followed Zane and Bailey home from school today," Dawna said. "He thinks you used to be known as Astrid Anderson."

Jane's lips formed a perfect O in the center of her face. Shock widened her eyes to matching circles and a series of emotions flickered in their pale blue depths.

Dawna saw surprise and something else. Panic? Dawna wasn't sure. But she felt a tug as Jane's body pulled away, her muscles tensing into flight mode at the sound of the fugitive's name. Christmas in jail, what a miserable prospect. Feeling a twinge of sadness, Dawna tightened her grip, adding regretfully, "I can't ignore this."

But Jane didn't seem to be listening. Her face wasn't turned toward Dawna. Instead, her gaze roved the room.

From the podium, the speaker said, "I give you Amity Police Department Senior Deputy, Marcellus Moody." Loud applause exploded, the crowd welcoming the banquet's end.

Who was Jane looking for? Dawna stared in the same direction. She realized that Jane was trying to make eye contact with Chief Shepherd. Dawna's stomach muscles cramped. She finally understood what her gut had been trying to tell her ever since O'Brien came knocking on her door.

On the fifteenth of every

month, Dawna's father reviewed the files of known fugitives who might be passing through West Texas. And the chief had had a front row seat, watching Bailey grow into a young woman. He couldn't have missed the girl's—or the mother's—resemblance to Astrid Anderson. Yet he hadn't acted. And now, the arrival of O'Brien in Amity would expose the collusion between Dawna's father and a woman on the FBI's most-wanted list.

"Please," that woman was saying now into Dawna's ear, "don't put handcuffs on me here, in front of everyone."

Dawna'd been *here* before. Down at her end of the court, about to execute an offensive play. Suddenly, the opponent snatches the ball away. Transition—you had to change direction instantly and defend, defend, defend.

At the microphone, Deputy Moody was saying thank you and good night.

"You're not going to run?" Dawna asked Jane.

"No." Jane looked as though she wanted to say more. But she must have changed her mind because the only word that came from her mouth was another soft "No."

Dawna let herself be convinced. "I don't have jurisdiction," she invented smoothly. "I could ask one of these guys to take over."

Chairs scraped against the floor as the banqueters prepared to depart. Dawna lowered her

voice, speaking under the noisy gabble of farewells. "But really, Jane, your best move now is voluntary surrender."

Jane gave her a puzzled look. "To you?"

By then Dawna had picked another familiar face from the crowd. "I suppose George Sterling is your lawyer." She paused for emphasis. "He is, isn't he?"

The confusion cleared from Jane's face and she nodded.

"Get with him," Dawna continued. "You two talk to the chief. Negotiate your way through this." Her hand still on Jane's arm, she nudged the other woman forward. They made their way along the wall, giving perfunctory responses to people who spoke to them. When they reached George Sterling, Dawna pressed the wanted poster into his hand. "Jane wants to talk with you about this," she said to him.

Dawna looked toward her father. An older, grayer version of Zane, Donny Ray Shepherd was watching Dawna. The measuring expression on his face told her he'd figured out what was going on. She was relieved to see him heading toward Jane.

That meant Dawna could execute the rest of her defense. Releasing Jane, Dawna pushed her way to the head table and leaned across it to speak to her mother. "Let me borrow your car."

Her mother frowned and her spine stiffened in protest. Dawna had captured exactly the tone her father used when he had business to handle that he wouldn't

discuss with a civilian. Nancy Lynn put up with that treatment from her husband, the police chief, but she didn't appear ready to take it from her daughter.

"Please, Mom," Dawna added hurriedly, minding her manners. "Please, I really need to borrow your car."

Dawna saw a hint of a smile flicker in her mother's eyes before her gaze headed south, toward her pocketbook. Nancy Lynn pulled a key chain from her purse and tossed it to Dawna, a smooth no-look pass. Dawna caught the keys, murmured a quick thank you, and headed for the door.

Ten minutes later she pulled into the alley between Yucca and Hackberry streets where the Celica had parked earlier. As she'd expected, the car was back in position there. After Zane ditched it, the bounty hunters had regrouped at the Shepherd home, hoping to pick up Bailey's trail again.

Dawna turned off her ignition but left her lights on to illuminate herself as she walked slowly forward from the Beemer. Only one head was visible in the car, a man seated behind the steering wheel. White exhaust plumed from the Celica's tailpipe. Wisely cautious, the bounty hunter inside had the engine running. And even when approached by a lone female with no visible weapon, he kept his window tightly shut. Dawna paused at the driver's door and pressed her shield against the glass.

After a long five seconds, the window powered down. "What,

O'Brien asked, incredulous, "Amity, Texas, has an FBI office?"

"I'm not assigned here," Dawna said. "Just visiting. I didn't have time to tell you earlier that I'm in law enforcement."

"'Course you didn't," he muttered. "Had to get out there and make that collar, didn't you?"

Dawna laughed. "Fraid the locals beat us both to that. Want me to tell you about it?"

"Sure, tell me a story." The sarcastic words were softened by the warm invitation in O'Brien's voice.

The door locks clicked and she walked in front of the car, climbed into the passenger seat. "You were right, of course. Jane Winters is Astrid Anderson. I saw her fifteen minutes ago. Fully lawyered up and in heavy negotiations with folks from Amity P.D."

"Damn." O'Brien smacked the steering wheel. "I didn't figure on her surrendering before I got to her. Perps usually got to think about it a good long time before they go to the law."

"At least she didn't start running again," Dawna said carefully.

O'Brien shook his head, dismissive. "She wasn't going to run. I knew that. That's why I figured I could go solo on this one."

Dawna was incredulous. "What, you're a team leader with no team?"

He grinned at her. "All by my lonesome."

"But you couldn't know she wouldn't run."

"Actually, I could," O'Brien said. "Some things are obvious after

you've been doing this a while. Astrid Anderson wasn't hiding anymore. She's been living on borrowed time since she let her daughter take that Texas Tech scholarship. We're talking the Big 12 here, with major TV coverage. Somebody was certain to spot the girl, pick up on the resemblance."

Dawna realized that O'Brien was right. Bailey could have gotten an equally good education in Odessa. But UT-Permian Basin didn't have a women's basketball program, so Jane had let her attend Tech instead. And when Jane made that choice, she'd chosen to come out of hiding. Dawna sighed. "Girl has so much talent. Guess her mom couldn't bear to keep her off the floor."

"Yeah, that would've been the real crime," O'Brien agreed.

Dawna caught the fervent conviction in his tone. "You sound like a fan."

"I confess. I'm a junkie for women's hoops. My niece starts for the Jaspers. Ryane O'Brien, maybe you heard of her?"

Point guard, all-conference last season, likely to make it again this year. Dawna had seen the Manhattan-Texas Tech game on ESPN, noticed the athletic Irish player. Pure coincidence, then, brought O'Brien to the game where he'd spotted Bailey. Just out there to watch his niece, Ryane O'Brien. Dawna shook her head as if the name meant nothing to her.

O'Brien studied her a moment. "You ever play?" he asked.

"Years ago," Dawna said. This

wasn't the time to mention her stint as a Lady Longhorn, her tough choice between the FBI and the WNBA.

O'Brien checked his watch. "I get going right now, I can just make the ten o'clock flight from Midland-Odessa. Connection in Houston will get me home by morning." He glanced at Dawna. "But I'm in no rush. Suit me just fine to fly out tomorrow. Maybe you'll let me buy you dinner?"

An attractive invitation. She liked O'Brien's looks, he liked her sport. But Dawna didn't want O'Brien to be in Amity when he figured out that Astrid Anderson had surrendered to Dawna's father. "Sorry, I can't."

"Nothing but bad luck for Tommy tonight. I might as well head for home." O'Brien gave her a lopsided grin. "You work out of D.C.? I'm down that way from time to time."

Dawna had just started a two-year assignment back at the Hoover Building, but she let the hint lie on the seat between them untouched. Maybe if he left right now, O'Brien would forget her name. Maybe the New York City papers wouldn't report detailed information about the arresting officer. Maybe when Tommy O'Brien figured out what had really happened to him in Amity, Texas, he'd be too far away and too busy to make a stink about it. "Have a good flight," she said, opening the car door. By the time she reached the Beemer, O'Brien's Celica was on Hackberry Street, pointed south toward the I-20 on-ramp. Dawna headed for home.

She was sitting on the couch, working her way down a fifth of Walker Black when her father finally arrived home at midnight.

"Deputy and Mrs. Moody brought Mom back a couple of hours ago," she told him. "She's upstairs, reading."

"Zane?" he asked.

"He's staying over at Bailey's. Didn't want her to be alone, she's got so much to deal with. Not just her mom, but her own life. Telling her coach, that kind of thing. They'll want to figure out a strategy, keep the press away from her, let her play."

Donny Ray fetched a glass of ice from the kitchen, took the La-Z-Boy across from Dawna, and reached for the whiskey bottle. "What you been up to?" he asked her.

"Saving your ass, mainly." Dawna was drinking her Walker Black straight up, no ice. The glass reflected the tree lights, festive glints of blue and red and gold. She took another sip. "I ran that bounty hunter out of town. Told him Jane was with unnamed law enforcement officials, negotiating her surrender."

"True enough," Donny Ray said.

"Been ne-go-shee-ay-ting for quite a while," Dawna drawled sourly. "Damn, Chief, you should've

arrested her soon as you knew. Aiding and abetting, it's a crime. Someone like O'Brien comes along, you end up in deep shit."

Her father clinked ice cubes in his glass. Outside, a car with a faulty muffler growled past on Hackberry Street.

"So exactly when were you planning to bring her in?" Dawna prodded.

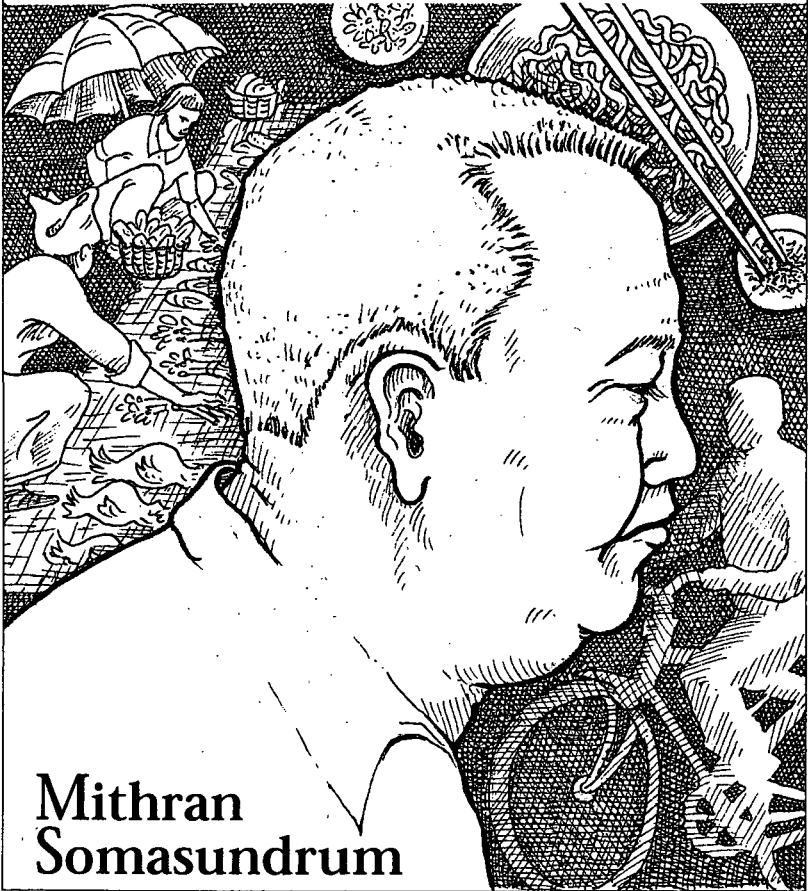
"April. Jane wanted to see Bailey make it to the Big Dance."

March madness. Was no one in Texas immune? "I cannot believe this. What you just said almost made sense." Ten years ago, Donny Ray hadn't let anything stop him from seeing Dawna play in the NCAA Sweet Sixteen. He'd probably broken some rules in order to do it. Just as she'd broken a few for him tonight. She sighed. "What is it about this place that makes a serious cop go soft in the head?"

"Must be the water," Donny Ray said promptly. "Lucky thing you don't drink the stuff. We needed your hard head tonight, no question about it." He raised his glass to her, acknowledging what she'd done for him.

She touched her glass to his, a private toast. "I'm an FBI agent. I don't let nobody get away with nothin'."

Four Days in April



**Mithran
Somasundrum**

THURSDAY, 23RD APRIL, 1998

After a week in Luang Prabang I'd seen enough temples, but I still had four days of my holiday left, so I took a boat up the river to Huay Xai. They told me if I didn't go by fast-boat it would be a two-day journey, but in fact a two-day journey would have been better. The fast route meant tak-

ing a "long-tail" with a souped-up engine. It meant sitting cross-legged and squashed for six hours with the engine screaming behind me. At the speed we traveled, the river became as hard as tarmac and when we hit waves it was like a car hitting bumps in an uneven road. And there were plenty of stops. Each time the riv-

er crossed from one Laotian province to the next we'd have to pause for a passport check, while sometimes at lonely mudbanks there'd be passengers waiting, seeming to have appeared from nowhere. When I finally disembarked, the circulation had gone from my legs and I was partially deaf.

And at Huay Xai there was nothing.

It turned out to be a small border town whose only special feature was its immigration post. When I arrived the post was still open and the boats still running. It would have been easy for me to cross the Mekong back into Thailand, but then my holiday would have ended. Thailand meant the office, it meant regular hours and the eight A.M. gridlock. I guessed the town on the other side, Chieng Korng, would be similar to Huay Xai, and I could see what would happen: I'd get bored and take the bus back to Bangkok, thinking about work as I traveled down. Instead, I wanted to recapture the lazy, peaceful mood I'd found in Luang Prabang. So I decided to stay in Laos for as long as possible.

I found a guesthouse that had bare, clean rooms, and after dumping my rucksack, I wandered around the town. Soon I decided I'd made the right choice. True, there was nothing in Huay Xai for tourists, but after two years in Bangkok, the things it didn't have were enough. It didn't have cars and crowds; it didn't have buses trailing ink-dark ex-

haust fumes; it didn't have any buildings higher than two stories. Instead there were lazy swarms of dragonflies hovering over hot empty streets, dusty wooden houses, stray dogs sleeping in shadows, and a muddy river that, like everything else, could only move slowly. This is what it meant to travel alone: no Dulani to hurry me on. I could imagine how it would have gone if she'd been here, the way her restless brown eyes would have swept over the town. She'd have stepped down from the landing stage already looking for the next event, the next view to marvel at, the next person to entertain her. Then she'd have gone striding off and I'd be half a step behind, with the uneasy feeling that for her, my presence alone would never be enough.

But now it was just me. So I could take everything in and enjoy the sense of time slipping through my fingers to no purpose.

Eventually I came to a noodle stall with four metal tables set on dry red earth overlooking the river. By now I was hungry, and besides, the view was good: the sun sinking into Thailand and the sky painted with a brush of dull fire. I sat over a bowl of noodles, watching the flat water catch the sunset.

After a while, I started to take an interest in the only other customer, a man in perhaps his early sixties, with close-cropped graying hair and a thin downturned mouth that seemed like a



mark of perpetual sadness. Or maybe it was his eyes that made me think that. Sitting one table away from me, he gazed out at the barren Thai border with the needy look of a refugee.

I was in that benevolent mood when everyone has a story to tell, and all the stories are romantic for being unknown. In this case, I thought of good times gone to seed, mainly because of his clothing. He wore a burgundy silk shirt that must have been fashionable once, but was now tattered and creased. Glinting on his wrist was an expensive-looking watch.

I cast him as a homesick Thai businessman whose deals had fallen through, and I began imagining a life for him. A family-run business was going to the wall. A fish sauce factory, perhaps, in Ratchburi. He'd come to Laos to relocate, but today had learnt he'd been cheated. He'd spent all his savings on land too mountainous to build on. Now he was putting off traveling back to Thailand. He didn't want to tell his wife of this catastrophe, but at the same time, he was desperate to go home.

At a rational level I knew all this was ridiculous. And yet in that golden light anything seemed possible. Any story I made up could be as real as his own. He'd settled comfortably into my imagination, and would have stayed there if not for what happened next.

He beckoned to the young girl serving the food. She came over

and he began speaking in a low, patient voice. I had no idea what he was saying and, I realized after a while, neither did she. Laotian and Thai are very close; if you know one you can communicate in the other (and besides, everyone in Laos watches Thai TV). But it seemed this man spoke something else. His words had the lilt and shape of Thai, but inhabited an unknown vocabulary. Also, there was an occasional un-Thai rolling "r" sound. The girl looked across uncertainly at the woman (I suppose her mother) who was doing the cooking.

"*Ow ig mai?*" the mother called out, but he didn't understand the question. Finally he had to get up and point to what he wanted. It seemed he'd been asking for another serving, but this time with the large-sized noodles.

I wondered how he'd got the first bowl.

Back at his seat with his food in front of him, he began weighing out the table condiments as though they were gemstones, tapping out a precise half-teaspoon of dried chili, a pinch of sugar, a spoonful of fish sauce, a pause, one drop more. He stirred the whole thing together, and apparently this used the last of his energy. He put down his chopsticks and stared out at the darkening river.

Now he'd moved out of my reach completely. His real story was one I couldn't even guess at. When he finally ambled off up the street, I felt like following him.



FRIDAY, 24TH APRIL, 1998

It turned out he didn't need to be followed. Huay Xai was a small town and that threw us together. The next day I found him in the morning market. It was a single road of a style I'd become used to. Produce was sold from mats on the pavement and, as with Luang Prabang, you had the feeling anything could be a source of income: a dead bird, raw sections of snake, two squirrels lying facing each other, looking as though they'd fallen asleep. The burgundy shirt moved through it all without much sign of interest—perhaps the markets in his own country were similar. I suspected that like me, he was just killing time.

Later he sat with a coffee and baguette, and when he'd finished breakfast, he strolled back to the river. Over the next two days it was a pattern that would repeat itself. He could never stay away from the Mekong for very long. An invisible magnet would switch and he'd be drawn back to stand hands in pockets somewhere, staring sadly at the brown Thai earth.

It would have made a good story to take back to Dulani, if only we'd still been together. Except that, of course, if we had, she'd have been watching him with me. This was the holiday she'd wanted for the two of us. Ironically, it was I who hadn't been keen, who hadn't backpacked in over a decade and had only agreed because to admit that I was too old for Dulani's holidays would be one

step from admitting I was too old for her. Which might have been the truth in the end, since we'd split up anyway. After unsuccessfully trying to get a refund on our Bangkok–Nong Khai sleeper tickets, I'd stubbornly gone by myself. I'd taken an angry satisfaction in noting all the things she'd missed: sunsets on the Mekong, the mist forming over Luang Prabang as though the town had caught fire, the sign outside Wat Pra Kaoew saying, NOW THE EMERALD BUDDHA WAS IN THE FOREIGN ABROAD.

And now this as well.

Whatever "this" was.

As the heat rose towards noon, Burgundy Shirt set off again, and since I had nothing better to do, I followed him. Through the hot, sleepy streets he wound his way back to a guesthouse. It was a small cheap place near the market that I'd checked en route to my own accommodation but had rejected on account of the dingy rooms. I thought it told me something else about him—he was anxious to save money.

Perhaps that was why he only had noodles for dinner, rather than a bigger meal, and why he drank only water with his food. (I'd guessed correctly—he'd gone back to the same stall that evening and I was thinking all this as I sat watching him eat.) I couldn't avoid thinking that if Dulani had been here, she'd have tried talking to him by now: "Come on, we should go and say hello. He's probably lonely . . ."

It was something I'd consid-



ered, but I couldn't do it. I'm not the type to approach strangers and start chatting. "Always watching," Dulani used to say, at first to tease me, and then later with an edge of impatience in her voice. Although she didn't put it in so many words, I think it was one reason she left. Wanting "someone more my own age" was her indirect way of saying someone who bungee jumps and slam dances, someone who is watched by others. That won't ever be me, I have to admit. But then, it can be educational to watch.

SATURDAY, 25TH APRIL, 1998

The next morning I woke too late for the market and so had breakfast elsewhere. I'm sure if I'd been with Dulani we'd have been quickly on the move, hiring bikes and riding out to a waterfall, or tramping around Huay Xai looking at "sights," and no doubt I'd have been tensely aware of the need to keep up. Such was the fate of a man in his late forties dating a woman in her late twenties. Now though, I was free to choose my own speed. So instead, I was sitting back with a glass of thick, sweet Laotian coffee. That was when the jeep arrived.

Coated in red dust, it came to a halt outside the shop. Two young men climbed out and stood hands-on-hips in the sunlight. One was shorter than me, muscular, and wore dark glasses, while the other was closer to my height and thinner. And both had something, a look about them:

Well here we are and what are you going to do about it? Walking up to my pavement table, they peered behind me into the dark interior of the shop. They were looking just over my head, their hips pushing my table slightly, but for all the attention they paid me I might have been invisible.

I think it was then I made a subconscious decision about them. I must have recognized they didn't fit that sleepy town, because when they spoke and I heard the now familiar almost-Thai with its rolling "r" sounds, I wasn't at all surprised.

They climbed back into the jeep and, kicking out dust, accelerated up the street. I couldn't help but associate them with Burgundy Shirt. Why else should these people be here? It seemed the old man had a life that could match all my fantasies. Whenever I'd invent something for him, he'd trump it with reality.

I sipped my coffee, trying to think of explanations and not coming up with any, and by the time I'd finished the glass, the jeep came back. This time though, it was different. It rolled down the street at the pace of a brisk walk and then turned right onto the road parallel to the river. I watched them go with a single, clear thought: They were looking for Burgundy Shirt! I was illogically sure of this.

I checked my watch—it was close to eleven. By now the old man had probably retreated back into his guesthouse. If he kept similar hours to yesterday, he'd



stay there until three or four in the afternoon. That was when this search, if it really was a search, would become interesting.

So I ended up renting a bike after all. But instead of cycling out to the waterfalls, I used it to make slow circuits of Huay Xai. The town was bounded on one side by forest and on the other by the river, with flat, dusty streets in-between. I set out at around half past two and shuttled between them, stopping in the shade occasionally to drink from a bottle of mineral water.

I began to get a sense of Huay Xai as a town waiting for something to happen. It was the way you'd see people sitting on stationary motorbikes watching the road, or sitting at food stalls with no food in front of them, or sometimes just squatting on the pavement in twos and threes. Often when the cyclo drivers didn't have passengers, they'd climb into the backs of their cabs and slouch down with the hood up. I'm sure it was always like this, and yet I couldn't shake the feeling that the final act of something was about to be played out, and that the whole town knew it.

Occasionally I'd come across the jeep, still moving slowly, and once we turned into a road together. We traveled up it side by side for a few hundred yards and then I stopped, feeling awkward.

After I'd been doing circuits for about an hour, the resting cyclo drivers started to smile and wave as I rode past (thinking, no doubt: another crazy *farang*). By this

time my legs were starting to stiffen. It was a long time since I'd been on a bike. Then finally, I saw the old man.

He was strolling by the river. As soon as I confirmed it was him, I turned my bike and went looking for the jeep. Eventually I found it parked and the two men drinking 7UP at a food stall. As I watched, they drained their cans, and then Dark Glasses took the car keys from his pocket and began rapping them on the table. The harsh metal-on-metal sound disturbed everyone, and yet he seemed totally unaware of the heads turning around him. Eventually the waitress bustled across wearing a pronounced frown. In all the time I'd been in Huay Xai, it was the closest I'd seen anyone come to showing anger.

After the two men climbed back inside, the jeep trundled eastward, away from the river, and I remounted my bike and rode back to Burgundy Shirt. In this manner I spent the rest of the day, traveling from one to the other. It wasn't difficult, as both the old man and the jeep were moving slowly. Together they made for a strange spectacle—like two blind men chasing a third. The jeep would stop a street or two away from the old man and then inexplicably move in the wrong direction. Or sometimes it would turn into a street just as he'd left it. And the old man always moved infuriatingly slowly. Free from the knowledge that he was searched for (by now I was sure of this), he'd stroll



down side roads, waving away cyclists when they pulled up next to him. Occasionally he'd stop to wipe the sweat from his face with a soiled handkerchief, or simply to stare at the river. He was living a blessed life, but I knew it couldn't last. Huay Xai was too small.

In fact, it could all have been over in a couple of hours if only the men in the jeep had spoken Laotian or Thai. In April, we were far enough away from peak season for the town to be almost free of tourists. I was sure that Burgundy Shirt had been noticed and that most of the locals could have given directions. But whenever I saw them at food stalls, the two men seemed to treat the Laotians with an offhanded arrogance. Apparently it didn't occur to them to ask for help.

Thanks to this, Burgundy Shirt reached nightfall without being discovered. At dinner, there he was again, measuring out his dried chili.

SUNDAY, 26TH APRIL, 1998

I had breakfast near the morning market and looked on as the old man spilled baguette crumbs onto his lap. As he pulled the bread apart, his watch flashed silver in the sunlight, and it occurred to me I'd never seen him check it. Not once. It was as though he was letting time run down. He'd do the same things each day and look forward to nothing, except perhaps sunset.

After his meal he stood, brushed off his trousers, and then,

with unhurried steps, slouched off to the river. Meanwhile, a long bus ride back to Bangkok lay ahead of me. I knew the sooner I got started, the better it would be. But I couldn't help thinking again of Dulani's reaction if she'd been here. I knew she'd want to warn the old man, and irritatingly, I felt I'd failed her.

I finished my own meal and then rode after him. The old man was walking parallel to the river as I approached.

And then I rode past.

I wish I could explain why I didn't stop. There he was, plodding ahead of me, his broad back dimpled with sweat between the shoulder blades, soon close enough to touch. But he had his own life and I had mine. And then he was already behind me. Maybe it happened too quickly, or there's something just not in my nature. I've always had a gift for avoiding complications.

I cycled ahead of him up the road, with a nagging disappointment that lessened as I got farther away. I turned left, away from the river, and passed the two men without first recognizing them. Then something made me stop and look back. I don't know why they'd gone without the jeep—perhaps it was simply that in the cool of the morning they'd felt like walking. They were about thirty meters from the T-junction. After spending a whole day driving circuits around Huay Xai, they were about to find the old man on foot.

Like so many other times in



my life, I kept quiet and held back until it was too late. This would be a story I could never tell anyone.

I was already cycling back.

I rounded the two and came to a stop with my bike across their path. Suddenly I was full of a wild hilarity. It was like being someone else.

"Hello! How are you both doing? Are you tourists? Me too, I'm a tourist as well."

They looked at each other and then Dark Glasses put his hand out, palm up, and said something dismissive. They both stood, expecting me to get out of their way, and when I didn't, they began to walk round. I pushed my bike forward to stay in front of them.

"Not going already? Perhaps you'd like to change some money? U.S. dollars for kip? Or U.S. dollars for baht? Or baht for kip, come to think of it."

The thinner man snarled something and made to walk on. I pushed my bike in front of him again.

"So what do you think of Huay Xai, anyway? As a . . ."

The punch in the face knocked me backward. I lost my balance and went over with the bike. My glasses flew off and I scrambled for them in the dust, with blood dripping out of my nose. A kick thumped into my kidney and the pain left me taking short breaths. Dark Glasses shouted something above me. I wrapped my arms around my sides and then heard them walking away.

After finding my glasses, I stood up slowly and saw the two men disappearing around the corner. There was a red center of pain just above my left hip. I dug out a tissue and stood with it pressed against my nose. In the morning silence I could hear my heart beating. With my head tilted slightly upward, I walked down to the end of the street. The two men were strolling ahead, and it seemed Burgundy Shirt's luck was still holding. He must have turned down a side road because he was nowhere in sight.

"*Tum arai?*" the woman at the guesthouse wanted to know, pointing to my blood-splattered shirt. I didn't feel like explaining and went to my room to change and pack.

I had the exit stamped on my passport, then from the landing stage stepped into one of the long-tail river boats. The engine sputtered into life and the wooden jetty fell away behind us. After the attack, I'd been in a hurry to get out of Huay Xai, but now that I was quickly safely away, I wished I'd stayed longer. I looked back at Laos and wondered about the mystery I'd left behind.

As I watched, a figure appeared on the jetty, the bright, fierce sun behind it creating a silhouette. With the distance of the river widening between us, the figure became a thin line and then nothing. It didn't have to be the old man, of course. It could have been anyone.

On the bus, my side continued to hurt, making a cramped jour-



ney even more uncomfortable. But in a way I didn't mind. It made me feel I was traveling back home as someone else. Someone better.

By early evening we were in the city's outskirts. Quick tropical darkness had fallen and I could feel the depressing approach of Bangkok—the occasional blazes of neon, the thunder of the trucks, and then the bus slowing to a crawl. The quiet streets of Laos seemed much more distant than a day's ride.

Stepping out of the bus, the rush of bodies at Mor Chit station was too much to take. I couldn't deal with immediately going back into the traffic for the crowded city bus that would take me home. So instead I bought a Sunday paper and some *khao tom mak* and sat on a bench, determined to keep at my own speed.

During my time in Laos I'd been pleasantly isolated from world news. In Vientiane, I hadn't bothered with the *Vientiane Times*, and nowhere else sold English-language papers. So it was only there with the fluorescent station lights flicking over the pages, with fingers sticky from the rice and banana, that I came across the photo of the makeshift funeral pyre, and learned that Pol Pot was dead.

A feature in one of the supplements described the shift of power in the Khmer Rouge's old guard, how Ta Mok had taken over and apparently placed Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea

under arrest. (Later both men would defect and Hun Sen would welcome them into Phnom Penh with flowers and the deathless advice that Cambodians should now "dig a hole and bury the past.")

Then I saw the old man again.

It was a younger, leaner face, but even in the grainy black and white photo the eyes and the sad downturned mouth were recognizable. His name, apparently, was Heng Suon. It said he was under arrest also, but I suppose he'd seen it coming and had fled until he'd run out of crossable borders.

Two clinical paragraphs outlined his notoriety—the villages in the north of Cambodia emptied to fill a labor camp at Stung Treng; the mass graves outside the camp for the workers driven to their deaths; the list of children's names with "kill them all" scrawled across it, supposedly in his handwriting. Above the article was a photo of a young woman sitting on a bed, with the number 207 stuck onto the wall behind her. Who knows, it might have been from Stung Treng itself. She was looking directly into the camera and in her blank stare there was nothing—neither hope, nor fear, nor anger. Not even the question "Why?"

I'd carried the old man to Bangkok as an ally, or at least a good deed. Now I felt I'd carried a heavy weight of ghosts down with me.

That sensation persists, and I've come to think Bangkok can't



be too full. There can't be enough cars or tuk-tuks. For the first time I like this city of strangers. I like the fact that there are too many people moving too quickly for me to guess the lives of anyone.

I think about Heng Suon often. I wonder what the Thai border must have meant to him. Perhaps in the good old days, the Thai army had welcomed him at their Hua Hin resort, the way they'd welcomed Pol Pot.

I'd like to explain Heng Suon to someone—Dulani even, but I heard she was seeing somebody else, and after the way we broke up—arguing about the Nong

Khai sleeper tickets—I can't imagine phoning her one evening to discuss the Khmer Rouge.

I dream of Heng Suon sometimes.

They're not "bad" dreams; they don't involve dead children or anything like that. I just see myself on the long-tail, crossing to Thailand, and the silhouette on the jetty, watching me go, is Heng Suon, knowing I've saved him. That's all. Just me in the boat and him on the jetty, and on the Thai side the long-tails are loading with exports to Laos; toilet paper, Coke cans, and sacks of rice, their noses pointing upstream as they tack across.

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FICTION

DEATH OF THE GUILTY PARTY

B. K.
Stevens

Illustration by M. K. Perker

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/02

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“For once,” he said, “I don’t have any reservations about the place. Party Planners—what could be safer, or more innocent?”

“Or more fun,” she agreed, folding the plastic wrap around her sandwich. “I’m sure I’ll enjoy working there. Still, the building *does* have an unsavory past.”

“‘Unsavory.’ That’s the word, all right.” He took the sandwich, sealed it more firmly, and put it in the paper bag. “But that was when it was Brabantino’s House of Pasta. I’ve never heard a word against Party Planners—no tales of searching for roadkill after midnight and grinding it up for meatballs, no stories about—”

“That’s enough,” she cut in. “I don’t even like to think about it. Now, the agency said I’ll have some evening work. You’re sure you can manage?”

“We’ll do fine, Leah.” He put a napkin in the bag, slipped a miniature Almond Joy under it as a lunchtime surprise, and folded the bag shut. “Sarah and Rachel are good helpers, and if you’re out late, I have the new Rutherford commission to keep me busy.”

“Yes—you’ll have to tell me more about that,” she said, and peered hopelessly into her purse. “Keys, wallet, pencil—but, naturally, no notebook. I never can keep track of the blasted thing. Have you seen it, Sam?”

MONDAY, JUNE 15

3:30 in the afternoon—my first chance to take notes. I arrived at

Party Planners at 7:55 and found it locked up tight. It was twenty minutes before Edgar Roderick arrived, flustered and full of apologies. He’s a pale, slender man in his early fifties, graying and crisply dressed. “I was up so late last night,” he said, fumbling to fit key into lock in the oak door carved with vines and leaves, doves and cherubs. “We hosted a retirement dinner, and those people would *not* stop making toasts. I’m happy you could help us on such short notice, Mrs. Abrams—we have a busy week ahead.”

“I’m glad to have the work, Mr. Roderick,” I said. “And please, call me Leah.”

He smiled but didn’t ask me to call him Edgar—not much of a Reverse Distancer, I judged. “I’ll show you around,” he said, leading me into a huge room with a gleaming hardwood floor and striped, dull gold, velvety stuff on the walls. “Well, that’s nice. Otto put the tables away, even polished the floor. He must have been here half the night.”

“This is an impressive room,” I said, admiring the crystal-dripping candelabra dangling from the ceiling and jutting from the walls. “Do you hold all your parties here?”

“Not all.” He squatted to pick something up—a dust ball, possibly. “This space works well for medium-sized parties. We hold smaller ones in clients’ homes, and rent hotel ballrooms for larger ones. You’ve never been to one of our parties, then?”

“No, but I read a newspaper ar-

ticle about your business once. I know you originally ran it out of your home, when you and your wife—”

“My ex-wife,” he cut in, flushing instantly. “Amanda Roderick is no longer associated with Party Planners. Don’t mention her again.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, stunned. “I didn’t realize.”

“Of course not. Sorry.” He led the way to a small suite of offices. “I’m still a bit sensitive—our divorce became final just last month, and it wasn’t entirely amicable.”

What could I say? “Divorces seldom are,” I tried.

“Yes, but this wasn’t just personal. It was business.” Switching on lights, he strode into the reception area, turned, and looked at me directly, his cheeks hot with anger. “Evidently, she thought I had the wrong personality for this business. Evidently, she constantly undermined my authority with the staff. I cannot tolerate that. She’s in Atlanta now, living with her shrew of a mother. I hope she’s happy.”

“I hope so, too.” A senseless thing to say, I know, but I couldn’t think of anything else. Maybe he is a Reverse Distancer—he certainly seems eager to initiate Intimacy Enhancement. “The agency said you’ll need me all week?”

“At least. Our secretary, Cassie, quit on Friday without giving notice. Evidently, she’s having problems with her marriage, and her finances, and her son. I wasn’t

sad to see her go because—but we must prepare for our 9:00 meeting with the Leonards and Lawrences to discuss the final preparations for Wednesday’s wedding.”

“Wednesday? A Wednesday wedding?”

He shrugged. “They wanted a June wedding, they wanted the ballroom at the Endicott Hotel for the reception, and they didn’t decide to get married until six months ago. June weekends at the Endicott are booked a year in advance. They were lucky to get a Wednesday. Here. I’ll show you how the phones work.”

Just before 9:00, two employees joined us: an attractive, petite woman in her twenties, wearing a bright teal leotard and a densely flowered chiffon skirt; and a big-boned, gaunt woman of forty or so, shrouded in a shapeless black suit, shoulders hunched down and forward self-consciously, thick blunt-cut black hair half-obscuring her face.

“Leah,” Mr. Roderick said, “meet Ella Godin. She’s a wonderful singer and dancer, an incredible emcee, a dynamite florist.”

The younger woman gave me a peck on the cheek, then reached into her purse, pulled out a small jar of raspberry lip gloss, and did a quick, expert re-application job. “I can’t wait to get to know you, Leah,” she said and winked.

“And this is Amelia Spogue.” Mr. Roderick pointed to the other woman, who acknowledged the introduction with a shallow nod.

"Amelia's our chef and decorations coordinator, also our percussionist. We all wear several hats—that keeps our staff small, our overhead low. That reminds me. Do you play a musical instrument?"

"I played bassoon in high school," I said, taken aback. "But it's been a long time. I doubt a bassoon would be of much use in—"

"Splendid!" he said. "We never had a bassoon before. Don't worry—Otto will work you in. He's our bandleader, our guitarist, one hell of a janitor. And here he is. Otto, this is Leah, our temporary secretary and photographer. Leah, meet Otto Moore."

Otto shook my hand without speaking. He was very tall, rather stocky, pleasantly swarthy, intriguingly moody—Heathcliff in khakis, I thought. "Nice to meet you, Otto," I said. "And Mr. Roderick, I'm sorry if the agency gave you the wrong impression, but I don't have any skills as a photographer. My husband won't even let me take pictures at our daughters' birthday parties because I always cut off heads or feet, or both, and make a blur of everything in between. You'd better find someone else—"

"You'll do fine," Mr. Roderick assured me. "Cassie was our photographer; if you're replacing her as secretary, you have to replace her as that as well. Just snap away constantly, and Ella will find the shots worth salvaging. She's our developer, and a damn good one. Heads up, everybody!

Here come the proud parents and the happy couple!"

During the meeting, I jotted down notes about three solid days of parties—bridesmaids' luncheon today, rehearsal dinner and bachelor party tomorrow, wedding and dinner-dance on Wednesday. I didn't have much time to form impressions of the wedding party, and I didn't much care. My scholarly interests focus on workplace communication: I was here to observe employees, not clients. At one point, however, I couldn't help noticing that the happy couple might not be all that happy.

"Now, the dinner-dance," Mr. Roderick said. "I spoke to the manager at the Endicott, Mr. Leonard, and if you want to switch to an open bar—"

"Champagne punch," the bride's father said. He was a round little man with a broad, shiny, no-nonsense forehead. "We had champagne punch at our own wedding, we had it at our older girl's wedding, we'll have it at Rose's wedding. Weddings are happy things. Folks shouldn't need hard liquor to have a good time at a wedding."

The groom's father snorted. "Maybe you should just serve root beer, then."

"Dad, it's fine," the groom said anxiously, running a hand through his hair. "After all, we'll have open bars at the rehearsal dinner and the bachelor party."

"At the events *your* family's paying for, in other words," the bride said. She was a jewel-like beauty dressed in peasant blouse

and jeans. "What are you implying, Clay?"

"Nothing." The groom didn't quite look at her. "I just want everything perfect."

"It would've been perfect if we'd gone to Vegas," she shot back. "Hundred bucks, fun time, done deal. I *hate* all this fuss."

"I'm sorry it's just fuss to you." Clay wouldn't look at her at all now. "It means a hell of a lot more to *me*."

"Well, well," Mr. Roderick said hastily. "Champagne punch it is. Let's review the entertainment plans."

Ella took over, and things went smoothly. She's a natural Reverse Distancer—charming, outgoing, able to sense when to lighten the mood with a joke, when to press for decisions. Amelia, by contrast, listened carefully, watched closely, but didn't speak unless Ella prodded; Otto seemed even more withdrawn. Interesting—only Ella has a personality suited to this business, but Party Planners is successful. I'll expand Chapter Four, put more emphasis on how Key Facilitators maximize Cohort Functionality.

The meeting ended at ten, and Mr. Roderick told me to report to the kitchen and help Amelia prepare for the bridesmaids' luncheon. Good, I thought, hoping I'd get to get to know her better—I figured she might open up more in a one-to-one setting.

I was right. As soon as we stepped into the spacious, blue-tiled kitchen, Amelia bristled with energy and confidence. En-

casing herself in an oversized white apron, she set me to work chopping celery for the chicken salad while she whipped up cheese puffs. To initiate Intimacy Enhancement, I asked a few questions and learned she'd worked here for over five years. Ella had been with the company half that long, and Otto was hired just over a year ago, when the Rodericks' marriage was breaking up.

"Mr. Roderick used to do the heavy work," she said, "but he was getting too old. And he needed a new bandleader to replace Mrs. Roderick. Otto was a perfect fit."

"Mr. Roderick must have felt lucky to find him," I commented. "It's a shame the Rodericks' marriage broke up, though."

"It was bound to happen." Delicately, Amelia slid a tray of cheese puffs into the oven. "Mr. Roderick hated his mother-in-law, complained about her behind his wife's back. And Mrs. Roderick hated the way he fusses before a party. I'm amazed they put up with each other for over twenty years. As for Rose and Clay, I'll be amazed if they make it to the altar."

"They *did* seem at odds—but there's often some tension just before a wedding."

"It goes deeper than that," Amelia said darkly. "He thinks her father's cheap, and she knows it and doesn't like it. And he doesn't like the way she—oh, hello, Otto."

He lingered in the doorway, as if reluctant to come in. "Should I

bring the fake cake in here? Or are you gonna decorate it in the banquet hall?"

She thought it over. "In here. And could you get the cowboy cutouts?"

He nodded and walked away. "Poor Otto," Amelia said. "He found out his wife was sneaking out for drinks with a man from her office. He confronted her, and she filed for divorce. Imagine—*she* walks out, when she'd been cheating on *him*."

"Maybe she wasn't cheating," I said, imagining how horrible it would feel to be falsely accused. "Maybe she and this man were just friends."

Amelia laughed harshly. "Boy, are you naïve. Just like my ex-husband."

The kitchen door swung open, and Ella entered sideways, carrying a large plastic tub filled with cut flowers. "How's it going?" she said brightly. "Amelia, it smells sinful in here. Don't tell me you're making cheese puffs—you know I can't resist them."

Amelia shrugged the compliment off. "You shouldn't complain. You never gain weight, no matter what you eat. Meanwhile, I starve myself, and I still look like a truck."

"You look fine now." Ella started to dip a finger into the chicken salad, then stopped. "No peanuts, right?"

"Would I put peanuts in anything without warning you?" Amelia demanded. "There isn't a single nut in the entire kitchen."

Ella smiled, scooped up a taste

of chicken salad, and reapplied her lip gloss. "Delicious," she said. "Is it okay if I use the small sink?"

"Help yourself," Amelia said. "And if you need to borrow Leah, go ahead."

"I could use help with corsages," Ella said. "How are you with flowers, Leah?"

"Clumsy," I said, wiping my hands on my apron, "but willing to try."

She guided me expertly, and in minutes I was amazed at the tiny, lovely things I'd somehow created—white rosebuds and baby's breath, graced by a vivid hint of fern. I'd finished my second when the door swung open again. Mr. Roderick and Otto entered—Mr. Roderick glancing at his watch, Otto rolling a huge, lidded plywood cylinder.

"Don't tell me you're still fussing with cheese puffs, Amelia," Mr. Roderick said, his forehead dewing up. "When will you have time to do the fruit kabobs, and the beans and franks and the fake cake for the Hughes birthday?"

"The fruit's all cut up," Amelia said patiently. "It won't take me but a minute to kabob it. And the Hughes party isn't until 5:00—I'll get the beans and franks done in plenty of time. As for the fake cake, I'll decorate that right now."

Otto shoved the plywood cylinder upright—it's five feet tall, six feet around—and Amelia slapped precut pieces of yellow, adhesive-backed felt in place, covering sides and top. Solemnly, Otto handed her felt cutouts of pistol-

pointing cowboys and hoof-rearing horses. Amelia smacked them on, then planted eight yard-high Styrofoam candles into subtle indentations in the lidded top. So, I thought. This is the fake cake.

Amelia wiped her brow. "We use it at all our birthday parties," she said, "and at some other parties, too. Ella hides inside, Otto wheels it out, and then Ella pops up and sings 'Happy Birthday'—or whatever. It's our most popular prop."

I couldn't pause to admire it. With Mr. Roderick hurrying us along, we got the food and flowers finished and the Party Planners van loaded. By the time the guests arrived at the Lawrence house, we'd transformed the dining room into a lacy, fragrant bower. The food made everyone swoon with delight, and Ella sang while Otto accompanied her on guitar. It was a lovely party; I just hope some of the pictures turn out, so Rose will have a record of it. Knowing how utterly I'd failed whenever I'd taken pictures, I snapped frantically, hardly bothering to aim and focus—aiming and focusing never seem to help anyway. With all those rolls of film, Ella should find something to salvage.

The one tense moment came when Rose's father shook Mr. Roderick's hand and gave him a ten-dollar tip. I saw Rose cringe, and no wonder—I'm not surprised her fiancé thinks her father is cheap. She seemed subdued for the next hour, but by the time we left she'd recovered her spirits, and thanked us all with hugs and compliments.

So now I'm at my desk, munching cheese puffs and taking notes, wondering if Mr. Roderick will send me home at five or ask me to help at the birthday party tonight. With everyone else in the kitchen, it's a good time to reflect on the communications dynamics of—oh, that sounds like Mr. Roderick. I'd better put my notebook away.

7:45 P.M.—I probably won't have time to take many notes now. I'm at my desk, waiting for Ella to finish changing. What a nice woman—when she heard me calling for a cab, and I explained that our car's in the shop, she insisted on driving me home.

Obviously, Mr. Roderick did ask me to work at the birthday party. He also gave me twelve dollars—my share, he said, of the tip for the bridesmaids' luncheon. How generous, I thought. I'd seen the tiny tip Mr. Lawrence handed him; my share should've been just two dollars. But when I protested, Mr. Roderick cut me off, smiled, and sent me to the kitchen. I wonder if he tipped all the employees out of his own pocket.

In the kitchen, I helped Amelia cut biscuits shaped like cowboy hats, then helped Otto construct a remarkably realistic campfire from Styrofoam logs and red foil. Ella toiled nearby in the darkroom, developing the pictures I'd taken at the luncheon, then finally emerged frowning. "Just look!" she said, holding out a picture. "It's *awful*."

"I'm sorry," I said, anguished.

So Rose wouldn't have a record of her party. "I *told* Mr. Roderick I can't take photographs. Aren't there *any* shots you can use?"

She looked at me in surprise. "Oh, sure. Out of the two hundred or so pictures you took, I can save maybe thirty with a little cropping and retouching. You *do* tend to blur, but your focus was sharp as hell on this one. Look."

She held up a nine-by-twelve enlargement, a back view of Rose and Mr. Roderick. Rose was whispering to him, and her right hand was caressing his behind.

"At her own bridesmaids' luncheon!" Amelia cried. "And he's old enough to be her father! Disgusting!"

"I spotted it in the corner of a shot Leah took of the maid of honor." Ella's voice shook. "I couldn't believe my eyes. So I blew up the corner section, trying to convince myself she couldn't be doing *that*. But there's no denying it."

"I'm not surprised," Amelia said, "considering how she flirted with the waiters at the engagement party. *Everybody* was talking about it. She even made a pass at Otto—"

"It wasn't a pass." Otto wedged another Styrofoam log into the fake campfire. "She just asked me to show her how to play a chord on the guitar, that's all."

"She sure got plenty close to you while she was asking," Amelia countered. "Clay sure thought she was making a pass. Evidently, he was very upset."

"He'd be even more upset about this picture," Ella said, squinting

at the reflection in her compact mirror as she freshened her lip gloss. "So we mustn't say a word to him. I'll just fold it up and put it in my purse, and we'll all forget about it."

"But Clay has a right to know," Amelia argued. "It's wrong to let him go through with the wedding when she's making a fool of him."

"It's a shame," Ella agreed. "But if people find out Mr. Roderick's having an affair with a Party Planners bride—good grief! Now! How about those biscuits?"

Soon, we were so busy I almost forgot the picture—almost. It was hard to act naturally around Mr. Roderick. No wonder he'd over-tipped us. He must be in a great mood. He was sleeping with his clients' daughter, probably chuckling about how skillfully he was deceiving them—and probably overcharging them, too. Disgraceful.

The birthday party proved a sweet distraction. Sixteen little boys dressed as cowboys, racing around, firing cap pistols—enough to distract anybody. And Ella looked adorable as she popped out of the fake cake in her rhinestone-studded cowgirl outfit, singing "Happy Birthday" with an expertly western twang. It was another grand success.

Ella's coming. Tomorrow, I hope to have more insights into the communications structure that makes Party Planners so successful and troubled and fascinating.

It was nearly eleven o'clock

when she climbed the three flights of stairs to Sam's studio. "Some evening work" is right," he said, turning away from his sculpture to smile at her. "I hope Party Planners doesn't keep you this late every night."

"Tomorrow will be even later." Leah sank onto the faded plaid couch. "But I haven't actually been at work all this time. A very nice woman, Ella, drove me home. She wanted to stop for dinner, and I didn't know how to say no."

He shook his head. "You say, 'Thanks, but I have a lonely husband who's probably keeping a succulent tuna casserole warm for me.' Do you want some?"

"I don't want to eat again for a week." Leah held her hands against her stomach. "The cook at Party Planners is positively lethal. The cheese puffs and the fruit kabobs, and so many cakes and—good grief! What *is* that? It looks like a monster."

"It's supposed to." He gazed at the five-foot tall, tensely coiled snake he'd carved from rough gray stone. "When Rachel came up to say goodnight, she took one look and ran away screaming. I was so pleased. Mrs. Rutherford should love her scarecrow."

"Her scarecrow?" Leah walked over for a closer look, reflecting that it was a shame Sam couldn't sell his serious work, that he had to make a living sculpting custom-made lawn ornaments. "Isn't she president of the Audubon Society?"

"She was." Sam picked up a chisel to deepen the serpent's

scowl. "But she resigned, and got herself elected president of the Horticultural Club. She's decided growing living things is more spiritually rewarding than merely watching them, so now she wants those damn birds out of her garden. She wants scarecrows—but not the usual, vulgar sort. No straw-stuffed replicas of low-class farmers for her. She wants natural predators only. I thought a snake would be a good start. That should make robins think twice about pecking Mrs. Rutherford's petunias."

"It should make them think seriously about never migrating north again," Leah said. "You're quite an artist. And—well, Ella says I'm artistic, too. I took the pictures at the luncheon, and even though some didn't turn out perfectly, she says the camera angles showed real creativity. She says once I get the technical stuff down, I could be a gifted photographer. So maybe I should take pictures at the girls' birthday parties. I mean, I know you consider yourself the only artist in the family, and that makes you very critical of other people's efforts, very reluctant to admit anybody else might have talent or—"

"Good heavens." Sam set down his chisel. "Of course you have talent. You're very creative. I wouldn't have thought photography is the best medium for you, but if you want to take the pictures at the girls' parties, fine. I had no idea it meant that much to you. Would you like to take photography courses?"

"Maybe some day." Ella was right—it was irritating when a man was sensible and fair all the time, making you feel foolish if you ever complained. "I'm sorry. It's been an emotional day. The bride's flirting with everyone in sight, the groom's jealous, and the staff! The cook divorced her husband because he made fun of her for being fat, the secretary stole office supplies and has a son who's a juvenile delinquent, and Otto's wife left him. Plus, Mr. Roderick's drinking problem isn't exactly helping things, and—"

"Slow down, Leah," he said. "You're making my head spin. You've worked there just one day, and already you know all these things about all these people?"

"We communicated," she explained. "That's what my book is about—workplace communications. Some people at Party Planners communicate very well."

"Maybe too well." Sam frowned. "Maybe this much communication isn't such a good idea. It's sure got you about as worked up as I've ever seen you."

"I'm sorry if I seem overwrought, Sam," she said, offended. "But Clay may be making a mistake he'll regret all his life, and I'm concerned about him—everyone is."

"I'm concerned about you," Sam said, and turned back to his snake.

TUESDAY, JUNE 16

Nearly midnight. I'm at my desk again, waiting for Lieutenant Brock to finish the last inter-

rogation and drive me home. It's still hard to believe all that's happened. How could a day that began so sweetly end in so much confusion and misery—and murder?

When Sam and I came downstairs this morning, we found the girls had set the breakfast table as a surprise. They had an ulterior motive for being extra nice: They wanted to sleep in the back yard tonight, just the two of them. I hesitated, not sure it was safe, and since I'd be working late, it didn't seem fair to make Sam handle all the extra bother. But he said it'd be perfectly safe and no bother at all—he *can* be irritatingly fair and sensible. I sighed, picked up my bassoon, and went to meet the cab.

I arrived at Party Planners at 7:45, found the door unlocked, and reflected that Mr. Roderick must have come in early. But he wasn't the one in the reception area when I walked in. It was a woman of about forty, wearing jeans and a tan T-shirt, looking intent as she rifled through a desk drawer. When she saw me, she slammed the drawer shut.

"Goodness!" she said. "Who—oh. You must be the temp. I'm Cassie."

The secretary who quit last Friday, I thought, remembering the stories about how quickly she went through ink cartridges and stamps, about Mr. Roderick's suspicion that she was stealing them. "Hello," I said, stiffly. "May I help you find something?"

She opened another drawer.

"Well, I left in a hurry on Friday. I thought I'd taken all my personal stuff, but last night I realized—oh, there it is." She held up a small, oval box covered with pasted-on macaroni shells. "My daughter made this for me years ago."

"I see," I said. How convenient that she'd forgotten one tiny thing, giving herself an excuse to sneak back into the office when she didn't think anyone would be around. Were her pockets crammed with cartridges, the box stuffed with stamps?

"So, how's it going?" she asked. "Any questions about the files?"

"No, thanks." What could I possibly say next? "How are things going for you? Are you looking for a new job? Or are you taking extra time with your family?"

Her spine stiffened. "My family's fine—they don't need extra time. My son *did* get a one-day suspension, but even the principal said the other boy started the fight. And my husband and I *did* have problems—or thought we did—but we're doing better, and his business is slow but is *not* going bankrupt. Does that answer your questions?"

"I'm sorry," I said. Ella was right—Cassie is incredibly oversensitive. "It was just an innocent question. I didn't mean anything by it."

"No? Then I must be imagining things." She slung her purse over her shoulder. "So you can tell everyone how paranoid I am. That should make you real popular here."

That was obviously a stalking-out line—a fine one—but the office door opened just as she reached the last syllable. Otto walked in and Cassie smiled.

"I was hoping I'd see you," she said. "How are you?"

"All right," he said, hugging her. "How are you, Cassie?"

"Better than I would have thought possible a week ago," she said. "I did the right thing, Otto. Jerry and I saw a counselor yesterday, and she was wonderful. Let me give you her number. I bet Mona would try if you—"

"No," Otto said. "I'm happy for you and Jerry, but it's too late for Mona and me."

"But it's wrong," Cassie protested. "It's stupid. It started over *nothing*."

She held out her hand; he squeezed it briefly. "It doesn't matter how it started. We can never feel the same way again. We know too much now, both of us."

"But you didn't find out anything really terrible," Cassie said, her tone reasonable and pleading. "Couldn't you learn to trust her again?"

He shrugged faintly—such a tiny shrug for such a big man. "It isn't that. It's that she knows I didn't trust her. She'll never get over that. Some hurts go too deep to heal."

Now this, I thought, is classic Intimacy Enhancement. But then the office door opened again, Ella and Amelia entered, and Enhancement ended.

"Cassie!" Ella cried. "How are you? We've been *so* concerned."

"I'll bet," Cassie said, in a distinctly Distancing tone. Defiantly, she turned her pockets inside out. "See? Just a crumpled Kleenex—no stamps. And here—I'll open this box. Oh, my—two paper clips, and they're probably Party Planners property. You caught me, Ella. Better discuss it with Amelia, so she can tell Mr. Roderick later."

That was another stalking-out line, and this time she followed it up with an actual stalk. Ella sighed. "Maybe you're right, Amelia," she said, reaching for her lip gloss. "Maybe Cassie is having a nervous breakdown. I didn't want to believe it, but—oh, well. Did you work out the musical arrangements for the bachelor party tonight, Otto?"

He nodded, reached into a folder he was carrying, and passed out hand-scrawled sheets of music paper. "Just the usual numbers for your vocals. I added some new instrumentals for before you pop out of the cake. Leah can help with those."

"I hope so," I said, flipping through the sheets. "At least I recognize most of the titles. The last one's a classic, of course, and 'Brilliant Disguise' is one of my favorite Springsteen songs. I've never heard it played on bassoon, but I suppose it could work. And 'Take It on the Run' is a great old REO Speedwagon song, and 'No Secrets'—that's Carly Simon, isn't it? I don't know 'Till I Hear It from You.' Who sings that?"

"Gin Blossoms," he said. "We'll make sure you get time to prac-

tice. Right now, I better set up the tables."

Amelia looked after him sadly. "He's a musical genius," she said. "No matter what instrument you play, he can work it in. Once, we had a temp who played harpsichord, and he worked her into the John Philip Sousa Festival banquet, no problem. But does his wife appreciate him? No. Apparently, she'd rather sleep with that geek from her office. Well, time to tenderize the steaks for the bachelor party."

Ella lingered. "You look pale," she said. "Did you work up the courage to ask your husband about taking birthday pictures? Was he angry?"

"Not at all," I admitted. "He even suggested I take photography courses."

"He implied you aren't good enough to take pictures at children's parties unless you take *courses*?" Ella shook her head. "I guess he tried to put you in your place. My—look at the time. Almost 8:05. And Mr. Roderick *still* isn't in?"

"He was late yesterday, too," I offered. "He told me to meet him at 8:00 but didn't show up until 8:15."

"He kept a new employee standing outside that long? He's having a lot of trouble getting up and getting to work. I hope he isn't—but I'd better get to my flowers."

Mr. Roderick didn't arrive until 8:22—I made a note of the time, so I could tell Ella. I didn't actually smell the alcohol on his

breath, but he almost stumbled over a throw rug. Well, now even Ella couldn't deny he'd been drinking again. He put me to work typing up plans for a silver anniversary dinner, and I had a quiet hour until a deliveryman arrived, carrying a huge vase of red roses. I looked at the card: "Mrs. Amelia Spogue, Party Planners." Amelia will love these, I thought.

She didn't. When I carried the flowers into the kitchen, her lips curled tightly inward. Ella, who was working on the bridal bouquet, shot a mournful glance at Otto.

"Let's see the damn card," Amelia said. She ripped it from its holder, glanced at it, tore it to bits, dropped it in the garbage, and dumped the flowers in, too, vase and all.

"Amelia!" I cried. "How can you? They're so lovely."

"They're from my ex-husband," she said. "He's still begging me to come back—as if I could ever forget the cruel things he said. Apparently, he ran around telling everyone how flabby I am, how I'm so obese he thought I'd drop dead any minute."

"You're not obese," I protested and it's true. She's big-boned, yes, but hasn't got a spare pound on her. If she'd stop wearing those baggy black outfits, she'd look fine.

She shrugged. "I've lost a lot of weight. He made me so ashamed—every bite I take makes me feel sick. Maybe he thinks he did me a favor. But I

used to get pleasure from eating, and now I hate it. I hate him even more." As if to demonstrate her loathing, she grabbed a meat mallet and let loose on a sirloin, reducing it to mush in moments.

"That one looks done," I said, rushing over to rescue the remnants. "Maybe you should take a break, have a snack—no, never mind. I'll make you a nice cup of tea."

She didn't reply, just attacked another sirloin. As I watched helplessly, there was a knock on the kitchen door, and Rose and Clay walked in. Yesterday's tensions seemed forgotten; finally, they looked happy enough to live up to all these parties—arms circling each others' waists, eyes shining, giggles erupting. I gazed at this charming image of young love and sighed. Oh, the sad gap between appearance and reality, I thought.

"Sorry to disturb you guys," Clay said. "We just stopped by to drop off the—yikes, is that the bouquet? Is it bad luck if I see it before the wedding?"

"Not at all," Ella said, but looked alarmed as she threw a sheet of tissue paper over the brimming circlet of white roses. "You mustn't worry about bad luck, Clay. Try to trust that everything will turn out well, no matter what you see."

"Yeah, sure," he said, and dug into his jeans pocket. "We just wanted to drop off the list of songs for the dinner-dance tomorrow. We finally got it together—"

"—after weeks of stormy nego-

tiations," Rose said, laughing. "I'm sorry to throw this at you so late, but my dad was so stubborn. He tried to veto everything post-Sinatra."

"He's a great guy," Clay said, kissing her cheek. "I love him, Rose—I really do."

She looked at him coyly. "Not yet, maybe, but you will. He'll never stop driving you crazy, though. He sure as hell still drives me crazy. It's part of his charm."

"It's part of *your* charm." Clay scooped her up in his arms, swinging her around as she shrieked in delight. Well, I thought. Maybe she *is* attracted to him. It would be a shame if her future husband were the only man on earth she *doesn't* find attractive.

"Put me down, idiot," Rose said. "Otto, we want to start the dancing with 'Love, Look at the Two of Us.' Do you know the words, Ella?"

"Oh, yes," Ella said. "The Carpenters song about lifelong love." She lifted an eyebrow to make sure I caught the irony. It was a poignant choice, since this marriage probably wouldn't last six months.

Otto gripped the list, not seeming able to take his eyes off it. "That used to be my favorite song," he said. "I played it at my own wedding reception."

"How sweet," Rose said, not realizing she'd nudged the irony level up another three notches. "Clay, we have to get to Aunt Priscilla's—she'll be freaking out."

"I'll speed you there," he said solemnly, "on wings of love. After that, I'll speed you to Aunt Dawn's, and Aunt Denise's, and Aunt Kay's, and Aunt Carol's. And tomorrow, right after the reception, I'll speed you far from all aunts, and fly you to Paris for two solid weeks of just you and me."

As soon as they left, Amelia seized another sirloin. "I don't think he'd be so lovey-dovey," she said, swinging her mallet, "if he knew about that picture of her and Mr. Roderick. Is it still in your purse, Ella?"

Ella glanced at her purse, which sat open on a counter. "I guess. I meant to throw it out, but I forgot. Well, I should go show the other pictures to Mr. Roderick. Otto, remember to get the fake cake—Amelia has to redecorate it for the bachelor party."

The day raced by. One minute, I scrubbed potatoes while Amelia hung up on another phone call from her ex-husband; the next minute, I typed while Mr. Roderick paced. And every time I could pry a moment free, I closeted myself in the walk-in freezer, practicing the bassoon solo for "No Secrets." Midway through the afternoon, Ella tapped my shoulder, pulled me into the momentarily empty kitchen, and smiled regretfully.

"You've had a frantic day, Leah," she said, "but you'll get some relief tonight. Mr. Roderick says you don't have to go to the rehearsal dinner at the Endicott. You can stay here and help

Amelia with desserts for the bachelor party."

Instantly, I knew what she meant. "He didn't like my pictures," I said, feeling hollow and wretched. "He doesn't want me to take the pictures for the rehearsal dinner."

Ella shrugged. "Oh, well. He says he'll just snap a few himself."

"He hated my pictures." I slumped onto a stool, nearly falling over backwards—it's not smart to slump onto a stool. "You were wrong, Ella. I *don't* have talent."

"I think you do," she said. "But he asked how much film you'd used up, and I *had* to tell the truth. He commented on the expense—but he said he *likes* you, Leah."

He hates me, I thought. And I hate him, and I think he's a drunken philistine who wouldn't know a good photo if it bit his nose. "Fine," I said, staring at Ella's still-open purse. "Tell him I'd rather help Amelia—or does he think I'm a lousy cook, too?"

I felt uncomfortable around Mr. Roderick for the rest of the day—how could I not feel uncomfortable, now that I knew what vicious things he'd said? It was a relief when he, Ella, and Otto left for the rehearsal dinner. Grimly, I held felt pieces for Amelia as she slapped them on the fake cake—the background pieces were purple this time, and the black silhouettes resembled the undulating figures in the title sequences of James Bond films. She

never spoke, and neither did I. I was burning inside. So, I assume, was she.

Around 9:00, we heard the van pull up. Ella ran in and plunked her purse on the counter. "That was tense," she said. "Clay looked very upset, and Mr. Roderick kept me jumping so much I never got to eat—I haven't had a bite since lunch. He must have something on his mind. I hope Otto didn't tell him about the picture. Once, I asked Mr. Roderick why he was so on edge, and hinted about a photo of him and Rose, and asked if Otto had said anything. He said no, but you should have seen his face. He—"

She broke off when Mr. Roderick came in the kitchen, followed by Otto. "Good grief," Mr. Roderick said, clasping and unclasping his hands. "Where are the pretzels? Where are the centerpieces? The bachelors will be here soon, and nothing's ready."

"Everything's ready." Amelia pointed to the brimming bowls and spangle-covered centerpieces. "If you guys could help me set them out—"

Groaning, Mr. Roderick seized a bowl of pretzels. For the next half hour, we all raced in and out of the kitchen, grabbing things, straightening things, sometimes dropping things because Mr. Roderick kept urging us to go faster, faster. Then the phone in the kitchen rang. He answered it, talked a few moments, and hung up with a moan.

"Damn!" he said. "Mrs. Carver's on her way to the airport and says

she *must* talk to us about the songs for the anniversary dinner, *now*. She'll be here in five minutes!"

"It's okay." Ella scurried to her purse, hastily reapplying her lip gloss. "Otto and I have the songs worked out. I'll deal with Mrs. Carver and then get dressed."

She hurried out, then hurried back ten minutes later. The pressure seemed to be getting to her now, too. She looked flushed and out of breath and kept rubbing her eyes with her hand. She grabbed her purse. "Now we *are* short on time," she said. "Leah, will you help me change? I've got to get into that cake."

Glad to leave the kitchen, I followed her to the storage room where the fake cake waited on its wheeled cart, where one corner was curtained off as a changing room. "Grab the four-inch silver heels," Ella said, ducking behind the curtain. "And the silver bikini, and the black lace slip, and the extra-dangly earrings. And—oh, I guess the black dress with silver fringes. Or the silver dress with black fringes. Which do you think?"

I peered at the two alternatives—they were both slinky and skimpy—that hung on either side of the choir robe Ella wore when she sang "My Heart Will Go On" at wedding ceremonies. "Black dress, silver fringes," I said. "It'll set off the shoes more."

She agreed, I handed her things, and soon she emerged snugly sheathed in black silk and silver fringes, looking fetching but

still flushed, holding her make-up pouch. "I'll climb into the cake now," she said, "and finish my makeup in there. God, my stomach hurts. I'd almost think—but that's impossible. Give me a hand—I'm a little dizzy."

Taking her arm, I steadied her as she climbed the stepladder next to the cake. "Are you sure you should do this?" I asked. "If you're dizzy, being shut up in that cake for fifteen minutes or more won't be good for you—there can't be much air in there."

"I've done this a million times," she said, lowering herself into the cake. "It'll be fine. And the show must go on, right? What's the last song you play before I pop out?"

I checked the list Otto had given me. " 'Heard It Through the Grapevine,' " I said.

"Okay," she said, a little faintly. "Well, close me in." She gave me a thumbs-up.

I closed the lid on the cake. A scene from *Apollo 13* came to mind—NASA technicians shutting the astronauts into the space capsule for their doomed flight. But that's silly, I told myself impatiently. This is just a party.

Moments later, Otto hurried into the storage area. "Is she ready?" he asked.

"She's in there," I said, and rapped softly on the lid. "Are you all right, Ella?"

Her voice came back faintly. "S'all right," she said.

Otto wheeled her out, and I grabbed my bassoon. When we reached the banquet hall, bachelors and once-bachelors were

ranged at their tables, demolishing appetizers. A mighty hoot went up when the men spotted the cake—they knew what was coming. I raced to the bandstand, joining an edgy Mr. Roderick on keyboards, a stoic Amelia on drums. Frantically, I tried to work up the spit to moisten my reeds.

Mr. Roderick, nodding slightly, gave me a Polaroid camera. "The best man wants humorous shots to use when he makes his toast at the reception," he said. "Snap what you can, whenever anyone else has a solo—unless that's too much of an imposition."

After the mean things he'd said, I never expected him to hand me a camera again. "You want *me* to take pictures?" I said. "But I have no talent, and I waste film—"

"Film? Why should I care about film?" he asked impatiently. "I'll just put it on their bill. And don't go on and on about your talent, and don't expect me to, either. You shouldn't need constant praise for everything you do."

Otto leapt onto the bandstand, guitar in hand, and we blasted out the opening bars of "Brilliant Disguise." Whenever I had a moment free, I picked up the Polaroid. Plan, aim, focus, I kept telling myself, concentrating on the head table, where groom and ushers were horsing around, jabbing each other and pointing at the cake. Clay's putting up a brave front, I thought—hiding his broken heart, showing his friends a good time.

We got through "Take It on the Run," I was shrill but competent

in my "No Secrets" solo, and "Till I Hear It from You" went by without disaster. Finally, soaring to the best of our ability, we thundered out "Heard It Through the Grapevine." Amelia went into a lusty drum roll, the bachelor hooting intensified, and we all looked expectantly at the cake, waiting for the lid to pop up, for Ella to pop out.

Nothing popped. The cake stayed demurely shut. Confused, Amelia kept drumming, faster and more insistently. Still, no pop.

The bachelors stared and then, as one man, began pounding beer bottles on tables. "Mgrumph," they chanted, inarticulately but rhythmically, thinking this was a tease.

"Poor Ella," Mr. Roderick whispered. "She's worked so hard—she must have fallen asleep. Better wake her up, Leah."

Oy, was this awkward. Setting down my bassoon, I inched toward the cake. Bachelors howled automatically at the sight of a female in motion—humiliating, since I know very well that after two babies my figure isn't the sort to inspire honest howls. I reached the cake and rapped. "Ella?" I whispered. "Wake up, dear. It's time to pop."

She didn't respond. Something's wrong, I knew suddenly—horribly wrong. Amelia's drumming started to falter. It's bad, I thought, and flung up the lid on the cake.

Ella lay curled in a corner, eyes wide open, face completely white except for a wide smear of rasp-

berry lip gloss. "Oh, God!" I cried. "Is there a doctor here?"

Already, Otto and Mr. Roderick had run over to join me, and a plump, short man was working his way up from a back table. He peered over the edge of the cake, took one look at Ella, and turned pale himself. "Drummer!" he bel-lowed. "Call 911! And you, big-guy—get her out of there. Clear the head table!"

Mr. Roderick ripped the table-cloth off, sending pretzels flying, while Otto lifted Ella from the cake and set her on the table. Oh, God, I thought, I can't see any sign she's breathing. She's dead already.

The doctor tried anyway, giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, pumping on her chest to try to start her heart, checking again and again for a pulse that never came. The bachelors stood back, silent and aghast, and Amelia ran over.

"The ambulance is on its way." She looked at Ella in horror. "Is she—is she dead? What was it? Heart attack?"

"In a woman this young and fit?" the doctor said, still pumping. "I don't think so. Did she have any medical problems—food allergies, for example?"

"Just to peanuts," Mr. Roderick said. "She's—she was—violently allergic to peanuts. But she was very careful about it. We all were."

"Then she probably kept epinephrine handy," the doctor said. "Where?"

"In her purse," Amelia said, sob-

bing. "But I don't know—"

"It's in her dressing area," I said and ran to get it. Maybe, maybe an injection would miraculously bring her back.

It was too late. When I ran back with the purse, the doctor dumped it out on the table—wallet, keys, calendar, pen—and found the epinephrine kit. He tried, then shook his head when she didn't respond. "I'm sorry," he said, wiping off the lip gloss that had smeared on his cheek when he gave Ella mouth-to-mouth. "She's—wait a minute."

He looked at his hand, rubbing a bit of lip gloss between thumb and forefinger. "This feels gritty," he said, and smelled it, and tasted it.

The paramedics rushed in then, but the doctor held up his hand. "Wait," he said. "Don't touch her. We can't do anything for her now anyway. Call the police."

"The police?" Mr. Roderick said, shrinking back. "But why—"

"Because this woman may have been murdered." The doctor peered into the cake again. "There it is. The police will want to examine that." He looked up at us grimly. "I think we should all sit down," he said, "and keep quiet, and wait for the police."

I don't remember much about the next hour—it was so sad and tense and awful, and there were so many police. Uniformed ones came first, then ones with cameras and small plastic bags, then Detective Brock. He was absorbed, at first, in talking to other officers, the doctor, Mr. Roder-

ick—but then he spotted me, and did a double take.

He walked over to the table where I sat clutching my stack of blurry Polaroids. “I’m surprised to see you here,” he said. “Another temp job gone sour, huh?”

That was a tad insensitive, I thought. “I know it’s the third time,” I said, “and it must seem like a coincidence. But I’ve had plenty of other temp jobs in-between. I’ve worked at plenty of places where people weren’t murdered.”

He patted my shoulder. “I’m sure you have. And you were a good witness in those other cases. After I finish up here, I’d like to talk to you. How about I drive you home, beg a cup of coffee, ask you a few questions? You can wait in your office.”

“Fine.” I stuffed the Polaroids into my purse—I didn’t know what else to do with them—and came here and started these notes. It’s been a long time—Detective Brock must be nearly finished. Such a wretched night—I can’t wait to get home.

She unlocked her front door and led Detective Brock into the dimly lit living room, where Sam lay half-sprawled on the sofa. “Sam, I’m back,” she said, touching his shoulder. “Detective Brock’s here, too. How are the girls?”

He sat up and rubbed his face. “Sorry—guess I fell asleep. How are you, Detective? And Leah, how are you? On the phone, you sounded so—”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Really. What about the girls?”

“I’m sure they’re asleep by now.” He stood up and stretched. “I haven’t checked on them since the last time you called. I’ll get the coffee.”

“And I’ll take a peek at the girls,” Leah said. “Will you excuse me, Detective?”

She got the large flashlight that hung on a hook by the kitchen door and stepped into the back yard, pulling her jacket tight against the breeze that had picked up so much in the last hour. The tent stood close to the house, snug and quiet. Shining her flashlight around, Leah spotted two small figures in pajamas back near the trees, both bending over, both intent upon some task. Goodness, she thought. Still up? And what are they doing?

“Sarah!” she called “Rachel! Why are you still up? What’s going on?”

They both snapped guiltily upright. “We’re just—cleaning up,” Sarah said, her voice faltering as her mother approached.

“Cleaning up?” Confused, Leah stared at the cloth things they were trying to hide behind their backs, at the bits of white fluff clutched in their hands. “Are those feathers? Where did you get them? And—oh, no. Not my grandmother’s goose feather pillows!”

Rachel stared at the ground. “We just wanted to have a pillow fight, and these are the softest pillows in the house. We didn’t think they’d bust open. We’re sor-

ry, Mom. We'll fix it. We'll pick all the feathers up."

"How?" Almost ready to cry, Leah took the hand-embroidered pillowcase from her daughter's hand and looked at the pitiful mess of damp, muddy feathers Rachel had collected. "In this wind, those feathers will have scattered all over the neighborhood, maybe farther. You can't even know where they ended up—there's no way you can get them all back. Some kinds of damage can't be undone."

"But we never meant to do any damage," Sarah said, starting to sob. "It was just a game. We never meant to hurt anyone."

"Well, you have hurt someone," Leah said. "You've hurt me, very much. You knew those pillows were the only things I have to remember Great-Grandma by. Now you've ruined them, and there's no way to make it right again. I'm very, very upset. Go to your rooms, right now. Your father and I will decide on a punishment tomorrow."

The girls scurried inside, and Leah took a moment to shine her flashlight around the yard, to sigh at the feathers lodged in the trees' upper branches, or still whipping past in the wind. Lowering her flashlight, she saw something else and almost shrieked before recognizing Sam's sculpture. The snake must be done—Sam must have put it in the garden to test its effectiveness as a scarecrow. Well, judging by the fright it had given her, it was damn effective. In this light, the rough gray stone

looked menacing as scales, the eyes were merciless, and the fangs! It didn't take much imagination to picture venom dripping from them, poisoning all it touched. It was frightening—and more than frightening. For some reason, Leah found the image deeply troubling. Shuddering, she shone her light away from it and walked back into the house.

Sam was waiting. "I'm sorry," he said. "Sarah told me what happened. I didn't know they'd taken the pillows. I should have watched them more closely."

"You shouldn't have to watch them that closely. They knew it was wrong, and they did it anyway." Gently, she laid the two limp, damp pillowcases on the kitchen table. "Let's talk to Detective Brock and put this whole miserable night behind us."

Detective Brock was hanging up the phone as they walked into the living room. "It was murder," he said. "Definitely. The lab tested the lip gloss in the jar in the cake, and the traces of lip gloss on the victim's face, and found ground-up peanut in both."

"It doesn't make sense," Sam said. "I know she was allergic, but how much ground-up peanut could you put in a tiny jar? How much could she have absorbed?"

"It wouldn't take much," Leah said. "I've read about this. Don't you remember the notice we got from Sarah's school last year, saying the kids can't pack peanut butter sandwiches for lunch any more? Even the smell can make severely allergic people sick—

that's why some airlines have stopped serving peanuts. Once, a teenager died after eating pie baked in a pan that hadn't been cleaned well enough after being used to bake something containing peanuts. If you're allergic enough, even a tiny bit can kill you."

"That's right," Detective Brock said. "Even a trace amount can set off a reaction called ana—wait a minute." He checked his notebook. "Anaphylaxis. Early symptoms include itchy eyes, being flushed and out of breath, dizziness, stomach pains—"

"My God," Leah said. "Ella showed all those symptoms. She'd been talking to a client—good heavens, that's right. We were all getting ready for the bachelor party, running back and forth from the kitchen to the banquet hall. Around nine thirty, the client called, and Ella freshened her lip gloss before meeting her. When Ella came back, she looked flushed, and she was breathing unevenly and rubbing her eyes. Later, just before she got into the cake, she said she felt dizzy and her stomach hurt. And she took her makeup case with her into the cake and said she was going to freshen up again."

"I knew you'd be a good witness," Brock jotted it down. "So she got her first dose of poison lip gloss around nine thirty, a second in the cake. The second one killed her—no wonder, in that closed-in space. Even the smell would make her sick in there."

"And if she tried to call for

help," Leah said, rubbing her forehead, "we wouldn't have heard her—not with our stupid band playing so loudly and the bachelors yelling. And she took the stuff on an empty stomach, too—she said she hadn't had a bite since lunch. And she—oh, Detective! I think she started to say it felt like she was having an allergic reaction. But she cut herself off and said 'that's impossible,' probably because she hadn't eaten in so long that she figured it couldn't be anaphylaxis."

"Good information," Brock said. "Next questions: Who could have poisoned her lip gloss, and when? She kept the lip gloss in a pouch in her purse, right?"

"Right," Leah said. "But she didn't watch her purse closely—it was sitting open on a kitchen counter most of the day and again that evening. And with us all rushing in and out of the kitchen, I suppose any of us could have grabbed the lip gloss at some point, poisoned it, and put it back. That makes us all suspects, doesn't it?"

He shrugged. "Technically. Any other suspects? Could someone have planted the peanut-dust earlier in the day?"

"Not much earlier," Leah said, considering. "Ella reapplied her lip gloss frequently—it was a habit, almost compulsive. And she seemed fine when she got back from the rehearsal dinner—I don't think she'd ingested anything before then. But I don't remember her reapplying her lip gloss until her meeting with the

client. So I suppose someone could have tampered with it just before she left the Endicott."

"So everyone at the rehearsal dinner is a suspect, too." Brock nodded. "That settles it. The families decided to go ahead with the wedding—bad taste, if you ask me, but no one ever does—but since one of them could be the murderer, I'm not letting anyone in the wedding party leave town until we get this thing settled."

"Not even the bride and groom?" Leah said, shocked. "But they have tickets to Paris—and Ella said they got them at a special price. If they don't use the tickets tomorrow, they lose them. Besides, what motive could they have?"

Brock raised an eyebrow wisely. "I talked to the folks at Party Planners. They say Rose and Clay put on an act in public because they want the wedding to go off smoothly, but really she's a slut and he's jealous, plus they fight about how cheap her father is. And someone hinted Ella knew something real explosive about Rose, something that could make a public stink. I figure Ella was blackmailing one of them—"

"Blackmailing?" Leah nearly dropped her coffee cup. "Oh no, Detective. Ella would never blackmail anyone. She was so open, so concerned about everyone, so willing to share, so adept at Intimacy Enhancement, such a natural Reverse Distancer—"

"Hey, that sounds like your sort of lingo," Brock cut in. "You working on another book, Mrs.

Abrams? I know that's the main reason you take these temp jobs—so you can gather data for your books on workplace communication. What happened to that last book, the one on Impactful Hierarchies? Was it a big seller?"

"Actually, I didn't find a publisher for that one, either," Leah confessed. "It's not surprising, given all the corporate takeovers in the publishing business—a critical examination of workplace hierarchies might seem too painful a probing of a tender subject. I'm working on a new book now—*A Hermeneutics of Workplace Communication: Optimal Cohort Actualization Through Strategic Intimacy Enhancement and Reverse Distancing Behaviors*. That's just a tentative title, of course."

"But a damn catchy one," Brock said. "What's the theory this time?"

"It's rather complex," she said. "But in a nutshell—sorry, inappropriate metaphor, considering—I posit that co-workers form maximally functional cohorts when they reverse pre-existing distances by risking intimacy. See what I mean?"

"Sure," Brock said easily. "You mean people work together better if they open up more. Well, you could be right. Of course, judging from what I've seen at the station, when people get too open, they end up saying nasty things about each other, and before you know it everybody hates everybody else, sometimes without knowing why. But I'm just a dumb cop—you're the one with a

Ph.D. Well, I've kept you folks up long enough. Thanks for the coffee, Mr. Abrams. And Mrs. Abrams—see you at the wedding.”

The wedding. Leah couldn't blame the families for going through with it—so much had been planned, so much spent—but she dreaded witnessing that ceremony. It would be so meaningless, since Rose and Clay didn't love each other. And it would seem so wrong, since Ella wouldn't be there.

She lay awake for a long time next to Sam, thinking about all that had happened, grieving for Ella, feeling guilty whenever she caught herself grieving for her pillows as well—such a trivial loss, compared to the loss of a human life. And when she fell asleep, sleep brought a chilling dream. It started innocently—Bruce Springsteen pulling a little red wagon through a garden, plucking gin blossoms to make a bouquet for Carly Simon. Then came an ominous rustling in the grapevines, and an immense gray snake emerged amid flashes of white light, tail swathed in rolls of film, fangs dripping venom, mouth stuffed with feathers. Then it spit out the feathers, and they swirled upwards furiously in the wind, forming a twister that swept away the wagon, the garden, everything.

She woke up screaming to find Sam's arms already strong around her. “It's all right, Leah,” he said. “It was just a nightmare. You're fine.”

“No, I'm not,” she sobbed. “I haven't been fine at all. I've been just awful. And—oh, Sam! Can we get up? Can we have coffee? I need to talk to you.”

Sam glanced at the alarm clock. “Coffee at four in the morning. Sure. Why not? If you need to talk, that's what we'll do.”

So fair, so sensible—how could she have found that irritating? It was just sweet, just good. She pulled on her bathrobe and joined him at the kitchen table as he handed her a mug. “Now,” he said, “do you want to tell me about your dream?”

“It was a dream based on a story,” she said, “and I bet you know the story. It's Hasidic, I think. A woman is reprimanded for being a gossip, so she goes to the rabbi.”

“Sure, I know that one,” Sam said, handing her the sugar. “Only the way I heard it, the person who goes to see the rabbi is a man.”

“Well, there must be a thousand versions. And it doesn't matter—both men and women can be gossips. In the version I know, the woman asks the rabbi how to atone, and he tells her to take a pillow out on a windy day, cut it open, and scatter the feathers.”

“Right,” Sam said, sitting forward. “And then the rabbi tells her—or him—to gather up all the feathers again, and the gossip says, ‘How can I? There were so many, and they've scattered in all directions—I don't even know where they've all landed.’ It's like the girls ruining your grandmother's goosefeather pillows, isn't it?”

"Yes—that must be what brought the story to mind. And the rabbi says, 'That's what gossip is like. You tell evil stories about people, and you can't know how far they'll spread, or how much hurt they'll cause. And once you've spread those stories, you can never call them back. Some kinds of damage can't be undone.' I said practically the same thing to the girls tonight—I didn't realize how important it was then, but I do now. Ella was a gossip—a chronic, compulsive gossip. She probably didn't mean to hurt anyone—the girls didn't mean to hurt anyone when they took the pillows outside. It was just a game to them, and maybe gossip was just a game to Ella—or maybe she'd convinced herself she was helping people, telling them things they had a right to know. But she hurt them, irreparably, with her gossip. And I've been a gossip, too."

Sam took her hand. "No, Leah. You're no gossip. You wouldn't—"

"I would—I did, and I have to take responsibility for the stories I spread. Ella thought Mr. Roderick's an alcoholic, and I fueled her gossip by telling her that he was late for work two days in a row, that he almost stumbled—"

"But that was true," Sam objected. "Wasn't it?"

"I was still wrong to say it. There's a Hebrew phrase—*lashon hara*, evil tongue—that applies specifically to saying things that are true but unkind. Even true things can easily be misunderstood because we're all too eager

to think ill of each other. Chances are, Mr. Roderick isn't a drunk—chances are, he's just disorganized and clumsy. Even if he is a drunk, will it help him to have his employees gossip about him? Or will that just make his problems worse? There's no telling how much damage an unkind story, true or not, might do. So we should keep our uncharitable thoughts to ourselves."

"And you do," Sam insisted. "I've never heard you say an uncharitable thing—"

"You didn't hear the things I said to Ella." Leah covered her eyes with her hand. "I even said uncharitable things about you, Sam, about my stupid pictures, and—oh, I feel so ashamed. I can't just blame Ella. She drew it out, yes—she seemed to have that effect on everyone. She was like the snake in the garden of Eden."

"That's right," he said. "The rabbis say the snake's the one creature who can't be forgiven because it slandered God. The snake's a symbol of gossip—it spouts venom, it spreads poison. Did my sculpture make you think about that? Wow."

"I know," she said. "It's a coincidence. So was the pillow fight, and Detective Brock thinks it's a coincidence that I keep taking temp jobs at places where people get killed. But life's full of coincidences—if the snake and the pillows hadn't made me see the motive, something else would have. Party Planners is riddled with misery caused by gossip. Take Amelia—she used to be heavy,

and she heard her husband criticized her. So she divorced him, and now she starves herself, and feels ashamed when she eats, and throws out his flowers. Probably, there was some truth to what she heard. Probably, her husband loved her so much that he worried about her health and told Ella he wished she'd lose weight. And Ella told Amelia the truth, basically, but made it sound ugly. Her gossip killed Amelia's marriage—and Otto's, and Mr. Roderick's. She was poisoning *our* marriage, too, Sam, and Rose and Clay's, before it even got started."

"So one of her victims poisoned her." Sam started to take a sip of coffee, then pushed his mug away, as if put off by all this talk of poison. "Well, if the murderer was looking for a symbolic way to kill a gossip, I guess he—or she—found it. Ella's lips spread poison; someone killed her by poisoning her lips. But if you're right, if she hurt so many people, which one struck back?"

"I think I know," she said slowly. "There were other things in my dream, too, things I haven't told you about. The only problem is, I don't have a bit of real evidence."

"So what do you plan to do?" Sam asked.

Leah glanced at the clock on the kitchen stove. "Well, the wedding isn't until five, and I don't have to be at work until ten. So, right now, I plan to go back to bed. And then I plan to get up at eight and start making phone calls. And the first person I'll call is Cassie, the secretary I'm replac-

ing. I want to ask her why she quit."

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 17

This shouldn't have been a busy day. Since the reception's at the Endicott, we had no cooking to do. We had to rehearse songs for the reception, though, and deal, somehow, with the flowers. Ella had finished the bouquets and boutonnières, but we still had to do the centerpieces for the reception, and make corsages for a slew of mothers and aunts, and decorate the church. We all toiled grimly in the silent kitchen, struggling to twist stems and harmonize blossoms. When we finished, we stared hopelessly at the arrangements that now looked random and lumpy, at the miserable heap of crammed-together corsages. It was like surveying a ruined garden. Mr. Roderick sighed.

"Oh, well," he said. "Extraordinary circumstances, and so on—I hope the families understand. Grab the tub of lilies, Amelia. Time to go to church."

Once there, we plastered swiftly wilting lilies onto pews and propped against the altar a lopsided glump of white roses that did no justice whatsoever to the magnificent vision Ella had sketched. When Rose arrived, I couldn't blame her for looking dismayed.

"Oh, my," she said, and rallied tactfully. "Well, it's very—white, isn't it?"

"Ella was our florist," I reminded her. "We did the best we could. I'm sorry."

She smiled graciously. "Hey, no big deal. Just flowers, right? It's cool."

So she was a nice girl, after all. I burned with shame, thinking of the unkind things I'd said and thought and hinted, and of what I was about to do to her wedding. But none of it could be helped—not the past, not the future. I had to go through with it.

Thank goodness Mr. Roderick had hired professional photographers for the wedding—and hired them long before Cassie quit, as he was careful to tell me, so their presence was no reflection on my abilities. I nodded, realizing only now that Ella must have stirred up bad feelings between us by hinting to me that he'd been upset about the film I'd wasted, hinting to him that I'd wanted more praise. Those things she'd told us about each other had doubtlessly been half true, half untrue, wholly hurtful.

Detective Brock was the first guest to arrive, notebook in hand, watchful smile in place. I sat in the back pew assigned to Party Planners, between Amelia and Otto. Mr. Roderick sat at the organ, whispering advice to the contralto he'd hastily recruited to sing "My Heart Will Go On." It felt wrong to see her there in Ella's robe. You were a flawed human being, Ella, I thought, as Mr. Roderick plunged into the opening chords of the march from *Lohengrin*, but you were a human being all the same. You deserve justice.

The minister ambled out, Clay

and his best man stepped into place, and the flower girl started down the aisle, followed by pink-clad bridesmaids, rose-hued matron of honor, white-enveloped bride on the arm of proudly tuxedoed father. It was so grand, so solemnly joyous—Rose's eyes seemed so pure as she took Clay's hand, and his smile faltered so little—that I almost lost courage. But no. This had to be done.

I listened to the minister's gently encouraging words, watched parents wipe away happy tears, saw bride and groom gaze at each other with newly-awakened wonder. And I waited. This is straight out of *Jane Eyre*, I thought, and I've got to be Mr. Briggs—about the last role I'd ever want to play. But I had no choice.

And we had, at last, reached the climax. The minister glanced at his book, shrugged in a half-embarrassed way, and asked if anyone knew of any reason why this marriage should not go forward. And I swallowed hard, and stood, and spoke.

Thank goodness for *Jane Eyre*—I could never have found the words on my own. "This marriage cannot go on," I said. "I declare the existence of an impediment."

The minister blinked, polished his glasses on his robe, and blinked again. "This is hardly the time—I mean, it's part of the ceremony, I have to say it, but really, whatever you have to say, wouldn't it be better to say it privately, when—"

"This is the only time to say it."

I was surprised at how loud my voice sounded, at how hard everyone was staring, at how close to fainting Mr. Roderick looked. "Rose cannot tie her future to this man. He is the cold-blooded murderer of Ella Godin."

The gasp was collective, and thunderous. Rose stared at Clay in confusion, then tried to clasp his hand more tightly. He took a step back from her.

"That's ridiculous," he said. "I barely knew Ella. Why would I murder her?"

"Because she knew too much about you," I said, "and much too much about Rose. She knew Rose was a compulsive flirt, and was coming on to other men just two days ago. Ella had proof—a picture of Rose with her hand on Mr. Roderick's behind."

More gasps from the congregation, a deep groan from Mr. Roderick, a still deeper groan from the organ as he half-collapsed onto the keyboard. Rose blushed as deeply as her name. "I know about that picture—people were whispering about it at the rehearsal. It's nothing. My father gave Mr. Roderick a ten-dollar tip at the luncheon, and I thought that wasn't enough—sorry, Dad, but Clay's right, you *are* cheap—so I slipped a fifty into Mr. Roderick's back pocket when no one was looking. That's all your camera caught."

That much, I'd figured out—that brought the tip to sixty dollars, and that's why Mr. Roderick gave me twelve dollars as my one-fifth share, not two. I looked at

Rose sadly. "But Clay didn't know you were just giving Mr. Roderick a tip—even if you told him, he probably couldn't believe it fully. And could he make other people believe it, or make you forgive him for doubting you? That's how gossip works—it destroys trust, and creates hurts too deep to heal. Clay knew Ella was the source of the gossip, knew he had to destroy the picture before it hurt your love and trust and reputation still more. I'm sure he knew Ella had the picture in her purse—she constantly reminded people she'd put it there, constantly left her purse unguarded, almost as if she hoped someone would steal the picture and show it around. And Clay did steal it, at the rehearsal dinner—and while he was at it, he mixed ground-up peanuts into Ella's lip gloss, so that she'd die of an allergic reaction, and the gossip would be silenced forever."

Clay stared at the floor. "I never stole that picture," he said, his voice flat.

"*Someone* did," I said. "The doctor emptied Ella's purse onto the table, looking for her epinephrine. Her wallet fell out, and her keys and calendar and pen. No nine-by-twelve glossy of Rose with her hand on Mr. Roderick's behind. What happened to it?"

Clay tried to shrug. "Someone else took it, I guess."

"But you were the one with a reason to take it," I insisted. "Besides, there's another picture." I dug into my purse, took out a Polaroid I'd snapped last night, and

held it up. "There you are at the bachelor party, making an obscene gesture at the fake cake. You knew Ella was inside that cake, you knew she was probably already dead from the poison you'd planted, and you made that obscene gesture to signal your triumph."

Furiously, Clay strode down the aisle and snatched the Polaroid. "This picture's a blur," he said. "You can't even be sure it's me—all right, it is me, but I'm not making an obscene gesture. I was just goofing around with my friends. We thought Ella was going to pop out of the cake any second, and I was giving her a thumbs-up."

I shook my head. "That doesn't look like a thumb to me," I said.

That's when Detective Brock walked over, seized the Polaroid, and squinted. "I can't tell if that's a thumb or not," he said. "Boy, Mrs. Abrams, you *can't* focus worth a damn, but it's evidence. Clay Lawrence, I'm taking you in for questioning, right now. Rose Leonard, I'm sorry your wedding was spoiled, but you really ought to ask yourself if you're ready for marriage, if you're still fondling other men and—"

It was terribly unfair that Detective Brock was the one to get punched, after I'd started all the trouble. But he did get punched, so hard he was sent sprawling across the highly polished floor, and smacked his head against the opposite pew. Otto loomed over him, massaging his hand against the sting of contact with the detective's nose.

"That's enough," Otto said. "I don't know if this is a trap or not—it's so damn flimsy, it sure feels like one—but I don't care. I can't let you people keep saying these things. If you do, no matter what happens later, some people will always suspect Rose is a slut, and Clay's a murderer. Well, I don't think she's a slut, and I know he's not a murderer. I killed Ella. I poisoned her lip gloss, and I stole the picture and destroyed it, because I couldn't let her do to Rose and Clay what she'd done to me and my wife, and Mr. Roderick and his wife, and Amelia and her husband, and Cassie and her husband—and you and *your* husband, Leah, whether you knew it or not."

"Don't say anything more, son." Brock struggled to his feet, wiping blood from his nose with a wilted lily. "You've got rights, and I've got to tell you about them."

Otto nodded slowly. "I'll listen to what you have to say about my rights. Just stop saying things about Rose and Clay. We've heard too much of that poison already."

"So, you figured out Ella was the big gossip at Party Planners." Detective Brock settled on the couch, sipping the tea and honey Sam judged most soothing to a quarter-crushed nose. "And someone killed her to shut her up. How did you know it was Otto?"

"From the way he communicated," Leah said, restitching the seam on one of her pillowcases. She'd handwashed it, she'd located a goose feather supplier—but

the pillows would never be the same. "Not the things he said, but the way he communicated through music, and the things he didn't say. Ella gossiped constantly, and so did Amelia and Mr. Roderick—half their sentences began with 'evidently' or 'apparently,' so they must've been repeating nasty things they'd heard second-hand. Otto never did that."

"So you figured he hates gossip," Brock said. "And the person who spread it."

"Yes, and then my dream brought everything together. It was full of musical figures and images—Bruce Springsteen, Carly Simon, a speedwagon, gin blossoms, grapevines—and that made me think of the instrumentals Otto picked for the bachelor party. All the songs were about suspicion, about gossip, about knowing too much to be happy with one's love. I realized Otto picked those songs because he was obsessed with those themes. No wonder—Ella destroyed his marriage by making him doubt his wife."

Sam shook his head. "So Otto didn't talk much, but he expressed his feelings through the songs he picked. I'm amazed you saw that."

"I'm embarrassed I didn't see it sooner," Leah said. "I went to Party Planners to study workplace communication, but I paid insufficient attention to Nonarticulate Signifiers and Subcognitive Verbal Substitutions." Already, she was working on the

title for the next book. "Rose and Clay picked a song, too, for their reception—Otto's favorite song, one he'd played at his own wedding. I think that made him realize Ella was poisoning their marriage, just as she'd poisoned his. I think that's when he snapped, when he decided he had to kill her. To make sure, I called the secretary, Cassie, this morning and asked her to tell me more about Otto and Ella."

Sam winced. "You asked her about office gossip? That's ironic, considering."

"I know," she said. "The Talmud says that saying bad things is justified only if it prevents terrible suffering and injustice—I hope this situation fit that description."

"I'll say it did," Brock put in. "You got a murderer arrested and cleared innocent people of suspicion. If you hadn't, we might've sent the wrong person to prison."

"That's what I keep telling myself," Leah said. "And Cassie did confirm my suspicions. She said Mr. Roderick and his wife had been happily married for over twenty years, but Mrs. Roderick made the mistake of confiding in Ella, saying she worried the business was hard on her husband because there's so much last-minute hustle, and he has delicate nerves and feels the strain acutely. Well, Ella told him what she said but made it sound like an attack, and he felt hurt and retaliated by saying things about his mother-in-law—things he'd held back for decades—and Ella told Mrs. Roderick, and before

you knew it they'd both said-cruel things to each other, things neither of them could forgive."

"I know how *that* goes," Brock said, sighing. "I've seen it a hundred times. Was it pretty much the same with Otto and his wife?"

"Pretty much. Ella saw his wife Mona at a bar with a friend from her office. It was just an innocent drink, Cassie said—Mona was upset about work and needed to talk to someone who understood her frustrations with the software she was designing—but Ella made Otto think Mona was having an affair. He confronted Mona, and she got mad and said he was incapable of grasping the complexities of her job. So he decided she thought he was stupid, and—well, that was the end of that marriage."

"A real shame," Brock said. "You already told us how Ella soured Amelia's marriage. Ella also gossiped about Cassie, right? That's why Cassie quit?"

"Yes, but before she did, she told Otto just what she thought of Ella. She said she was trying to save his marriage. I'm sure she was—but she also made him hate Ella. That poison did its work, too. It helped make him decide to commit murder."

"I guess." Brock rubbed his chin doubtfully. "I mean, I know Otto did it—he signed the confession, gave us all the details—but it's hard to believe gossip was the only motive. That hardly seems like a reason to kill a person. Hell, everybody gossips some."

"True," Leah said. "The rabbis

say it's one of the hardest sins to avoid. But they still say it's one of the worst sins—right up there with murder and idolatry and incest. That seems extreme, but maybe not, considering the damage gossip can do."

"It did plenty of damage at Party Planners." Sam refilled the teacups. "All those marriages ruined, all that misery and distrust, and finally a murder. I'm glad you stopped it before it ruined Rose and Clay's marriage, too."

"I'm glad they agreed to play along," Leah said. "I never would have said those things at their wedding otherwise. But when I called them this morning, they agreed that catching a murderer was more important than having a wedding go smoothly."

"And they didn't want to lose their tickets to Paris," Brock reminded her. "If we hadn't had this case locked up, no way would I have let them on that plane. They played their parts well. I think I carried my lines off good, too, and you—you were great. I'm sorry Mr. Roderick fired you."

"I can't blame him," Leah said, grimacing, "after I made such a scene at the wedding and left him without a guitarist for the reception."

"Yeah, he ended up with a sorry excuse for a band," Brock said. "I stopped by the Endicott, and it was just him on keyboards, Amelia on drums—no guitar, no vocals, no bassoon. People were dancing up a storm, though. It's funny how fast some folks bounce

back after a shock. But not Mr. Roderick—he says he's shutting down Party Planners. He says he feels like the business is cursed—like the *building* is cursed."

"No wonder it gives him the creeps," Sam said, "considering what went on there when it was Brabantino's House of Pasta. Those stories about grinding up roadkill—"

Brock set his teacup down. "Those stories," he said, "were just stories."

Leah stared at him. "That can't be. Everybody said Brabantino put roadkill in the meatballs. I saw reports on TV, and—"

"—and there was never a bit of proof to back up any of it," Brock said. "I worked that case. A customer saw someone toss something that looked like a squirrel skin in a trashcan outside the restaurant. He assumed the worst and ran to us—and also to the TV stations. Well, by the time we figured out it'd just been a waiter throwing away an old fur hat, the stories had spread so far and grown so much there was no stopping them."

"So the customer told the truth," Leah said, "but that truth

got twisted into horrible stories—and I accepted those stories without question. Good grief! I'm a fine one to lecture about the evils of gossip. What happened to poor Mr. Brabantino?"

"He had some rough years," Brock admitted. "Lost all his money, took to drinking. But his wife stuck with him, and they moved to Boston, changed their names, and opened a new restaurant. O'Reilly's House of Vegetables, they call it—they figure they won't run into trouble if they avoid meat altogether. I hear they're doing great."

"Thank goodness." Leah put down the first pillowcase and picked up the second. "Well, Sam, we've always meant to take a trip to Boston. Let's go next month, and take Sarah and Rachel to O'Reilly's House of Vegetables for Fourth of July dinner. That's not much of a way for us to atone for believing those stories, but it's something."

"Fine with me," Sam said. "But I don't know how much the girls will enjoy it. They hate vegetables."

"I know." She smiled at him sweetly. "That's going to be *their* way of atoning."

Copperhead Jack Meets the Witness

Stuart R. Ball



I was breathing hard when I stumbled through the door of Joe's place.

"Billy, what's the matter with you?" Sheriff Brady asked. He and Copperhead Jack both had their feet up on the same table.

"Bear," I managed to gasp.

"Outside?" Brady asked calmly. He had his chair leaned back so it balanced on two legs.

"In the woods," I replied. I paused to catch my breath. "I went out to check on that deer stand that you put up last year, Jack. I wanted to see what kind of shape it was in, kinda hoping you'd let me use it this year. I found that hat you lost when I looked inside, and I was bringing it back to you."

"Glad to hear it," said Jack. "Where's the hat?"

"I lost it," I replied, "when the bear chased me. I was walking by that bluff about a quarter mile behind the deer stand, and this brown bear came out of nowhere. I think he's living in that cave at

the base of the bluff. I made it to a tree, but that was only because I dropped the hat and the bear went after it. He nosed around the tree for a while, looking for a way up, then took the hat off into the woods and I ran all the way here."

Jack thought a minute. "Did this bear have a limp and a white streak on his head?"

I nodded. "You've seen him before?" I asked.

"We're acquainted. Our last meetin' left him with a lame foot and a real bad attitude. I kinda named him Elmo. I figure my hat smelled like me, so he thought you were me."

"Good thing I dropped it then."

"I don't know about that. I liked that hat."

Sheriff Brady bought me a beer and asked Jack if he'd had any luck with the deer stand last year. Jack was just winding up to tell us about the big buck he took when a woman stumbled through the door, more winded than I had been, if you can imagine.

"Please help me," she said. "You've got to help me."

"If we can, miss," Brady replied, although without moving. "Exactly what kind of help do you need?"

"People are trying to kill me." Her accent placed her quite a ways from here. She looked behind her as if she expected them to come through the door any second.

Brady looked at Jack, who shrugged. "Exactly who wants to kill you and why?" he asked. You could tell he didn't believe it.

"I don't know. They were driving a dark-colored pickup truck."

"That describes half the vehicles in the county," Brady replied. He was right. The other half are light-colored pickup trucks.

"They were shooting at us," she said.

"Aha," Brady said. Now he was interested. "Who is 'us'?"

"I was with a federal marshal. I think they killed him."

"And you are?"

"Rachel Nelson," she said.

Brady's hand was hovering over the grip of his .44 magnum. "You were a prisoner?" he asked.

"No. I'm married to Johnny Nelson."

"Knuckles Nelson? The mobster?" I asked.

"Yes. The marshal was taking me to court to testify. I guess John doesn't want that to happen. The marshal found out that there was a contract on us, so he decided to drive instead of flying. He was afraid they'd be watching the route to the airport. He was calling in for back-up when a pickup pulled up beside us and someone started shooting. The car ran into a ditch and I got out and started running. You *will* help me, won't you, Sheriff?"

"How do I know you weren't a prisoner that he was transporting to trial?"

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She held out the arm of her expensive jacket, which pulled up to reveal a gold and diamond bracelet on her arm. "Do they usually let prisoners dress like this?" she asked.

"Not usually," Brady admitted. He got up and used the telephone to tell a deputy to go look for the marshal's car. He sat back down to wait, putting his feet up on the table again and picking up his drink. Rachel looked around, then pulled out a chair and sat down. Before the deputy called back, the door opened again and a character in an expensive suit came in. His eyes narrowed when he saw Rachel, then he saw Brady and smiled. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a badge, which was good, because Brady had already drawn his .44 and was aiming it under the table. He still hadn't moved his feet or set his drink down, although he had very gently lowered his chair onto all four legs so he wouldn't go over backwards if he had to shoot.

"Chip Halverson, Federal Marshal," the suit said.

Rachel looked relieved. "He got through," she said.

"You'd be Rachel Nelson?" Halverson asked.

She nodded.

"I'm here to take you in, Mrs. Nelson," said Halverson. "You have a court date day after tomorrow."

"The other marshal is dead," she replied.

"I know. We'd better go before they find us, too."

"Need a police escort?" asked Brady.

"That would be too conspicuous. We'll just keep a low profile."

Halverson took Rachel by the arm and they started out the door. We heard someone gunning an engine, then Halverson pushed Rachel back through the door and slammed it behind them. They hit the floor just as bullets started spraying around the windows. It sounded like an army out there. Jack grabbed his glass and pushed over the table that he and Brady had been sitting at, pulling Rachel down behind it.

"Jack, did you have to use *that* table?" Brady shouted as he watched his beer crash to the floor. Jack just shrugged.

Brady and Halverson drew their guns and returned fire, while Joe dropped behind the bar and shouted at them to aim through the windows, since they were already broke. A couple of slugs came through the door, and Joe got his ten-gauge from behind the counter.

"Danged gangsters," he shouted as he pumped double-aught shot through the windows. "That's a brand-new front door they're shooting up!" The blast from the shotgun made my ears ring and added considerably to the smoke that filled the room.

"Jack, you and Billy get Rachel out the back," Brady hollered as he shoved rounds into the cylinder of his gun. "We'll catch up with you later!"

We crawled behind the bar and went out the back door, then ran

down a game trail. The shots got fainter and fainter, until we could barely hear them by the time we got to Joe's still. We kept moving until Rachel said she had to stop. It must have been hard going in those flimsy shoes she was wearing.

"Over here," Jack said, pointing to a tree stump. She brushed off the top and sat down.

"We haven't met," Jack said. "I'm Copperhead Jack. This here's Billy." He shook her hand. I thought for a minute he was going to kiss it.

"I'm very grateful for your help," she said.

"How did you get mixed up with someone like Knuckles Nelson?" I asked.

"Oh, I was waiting tables in Vegas and trying to break into modeling when Johnny took a liking to me. I had no idea what he did. I thought he could get me into the modeling business, but one thing led to another and we ended up married. I didn't find out until a lot later what he did for a living."

I could believe the modeling part. She sure had the figure for it. Jack had noticed, too.

"What were you doing out here?" Jack asked.

"Hiding. I have an uncle who lives around here. John tried to have me killed once before and I thought I'd be safer here. But I guess if the marshals can find me, Johnny's boys can too. That must have been who was shooting at us. Will the sheriff be all right?"

"Brady? They'll be sorry if he catches them," Jack said. I had often wondered what would happen if Jack and Brady ever tangled. Not that I'd want to be in the same county if they did.

"I hope he does catch them," she said.

"Knuckles must really be mixed up to try and kill you," Jack said.

"That's why I agreed to testify against him. I think he still loves me, but he'll do anything to stay out of jail, and I'm tired of wondering when they'll find me. The federal people promised to put me in the witness protection program."

"We'd better go," Jack said. "We don't want to be too near the road if they come looking for us."

We went on for about another hour. Jack kept finding reasons to take Rachel's arm and help her over a fallen log or a ditch or something. He finally stopped under the tree where the deer stand was. He had built it well: It was covered to keep rain off his head and had a sturdy ladder leading up through the branches to the platform, which you could just see the bottom of through the leaves. He had built it about six months before last season started so the deer would get used to it. Or maybe so he could start the season a little early.

"Billy," he said, "you head back toward town. Brady's probably

looking for us by now. I'll hide Miss Rachel. You find Brady and Halverson and bring them back here."

I went back the way we'd come, muttering about why I had to be the one to find the sheriff and wondering what Jack and Rachel were up to while I was gone. Not that I was jealous or anything.

I ran into Halverson after I'd gone maybe a quarter of a mile. He was puffing his way up a steep hill.

"Over here," I said, waving. I waited for him.

"Where's Brady?" I asked, when he'd walked up to where I was.

"Chasing the black pickup that started all the shooting. Where's Mrs. Nelson?"

"With Jack. Come on." I led him back to where Jack waited.

"Glad to see you found us, Mr. Halverson," Jack said.

"You won't be," Halverson replied. I turned around and saw that he had his gun pointed our way.

"You're not really a federal marshal, are you?" I asked.

"Sure I am. I just let Knuckles supplement my income from time to time. With Brady doing me the favor of chasing the hired guns all over the county, I'm free to collect on that contract myself. After that, Knuckles will get me out of the country, and I'll retire to some place with umbrella drinks and no extradition. Where's the girl?"

"Why should I tell you?" Jack replied.

"Because if you don't, I'll kill you and find her myself."

"Oh," Jack replied. "Since you put it that way . . ."

"Jack," I exclaimed.

"A very reasonable decision," Halverson said.

"She's in a cave at the base of that bluff," Jack said, pointing. "Just over that hill."

"You hid her *there*?" I said.

"Be quiet," Jack replied. He turned to Halverson. "She has a gun. I told her to shoot if anyone but Brady or me tried to come in. I told her I'd wave my hat."

"In that case," Halverson said, "I'll need your hat. And let me have your jacket, too. I don't want to confuse her until I'm inside."

"But Jack—" I began.

"Shut up, Billy," he replied.

"Yes, Billy, shut up," echoed Halverson.

Jack handed over his hat and removed his jacket. Halverson motioned with his gun. "I'd shoot you," he said, "but she'd hear it. Looks like you two will have to go along. If you try anything, I'll kill you." He put on the hat and jacket and told us to walk in front of him. I kept thinking I smelled something, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was.

"He's going to kill us, you know," I said.

"No, he's not," Jack replied.

~~~~~

"Jack, I thought you had taken a liking to Rachel," I said.

"Not like you think. She's nice enough, but she's not really my type. I just can't see her hunting a bear with a 30.06. And I think her taste in clothes, food, and everything else is a little out of my reach."

"So you let Halverson have her?" I was disgusted.

Jack just shook his head at me and looked real disappointed.

"Shut up," Halverson said. About then, we heard a growl from behind us.

"That'd be Elmo," Jack said.

We turned around as the same bear that had chased me came out of the trees and went straight for Halverson. Halverson looked around wildly, shouted something I couldn't understand, then ran into the woods with Elmo right behind him. The shouting and growling moved away and trailed off into the distance.

Jack started walking back the way we'd come.

"Where are you going now?" I asked.

"To get Miss Rachel," Jack replied.

I sniffed again. "Perfume," I said. "You used Rachel's perfume to mask your scent so Elmo would go after Halverson instead of you."

"That I did."

"It don't smell nearly as good on you as it does on her."

"I'm glad you think so."

We reached the tree stand and Jack looked up into the tree. "You can come down now, Miss Rachel," he said. Rachel climbed down the ladder.

"How did you know about Halverson?" I asked.

"You don't buy silk suits on a federal marshal's salary. And Halverson showed up awfully fast, considering that the nearest marshals are over in Cain County. I bet we'll find his car just over that way."

"What about Halverson?"

Jack shrugged. "If he drops the hat, like you did, he'll probably make it to the tree, and then Elmo will keep him there until Brady gets back. But either way, I lose another hat."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Archives

Appointment with the Dream Shrinker. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION

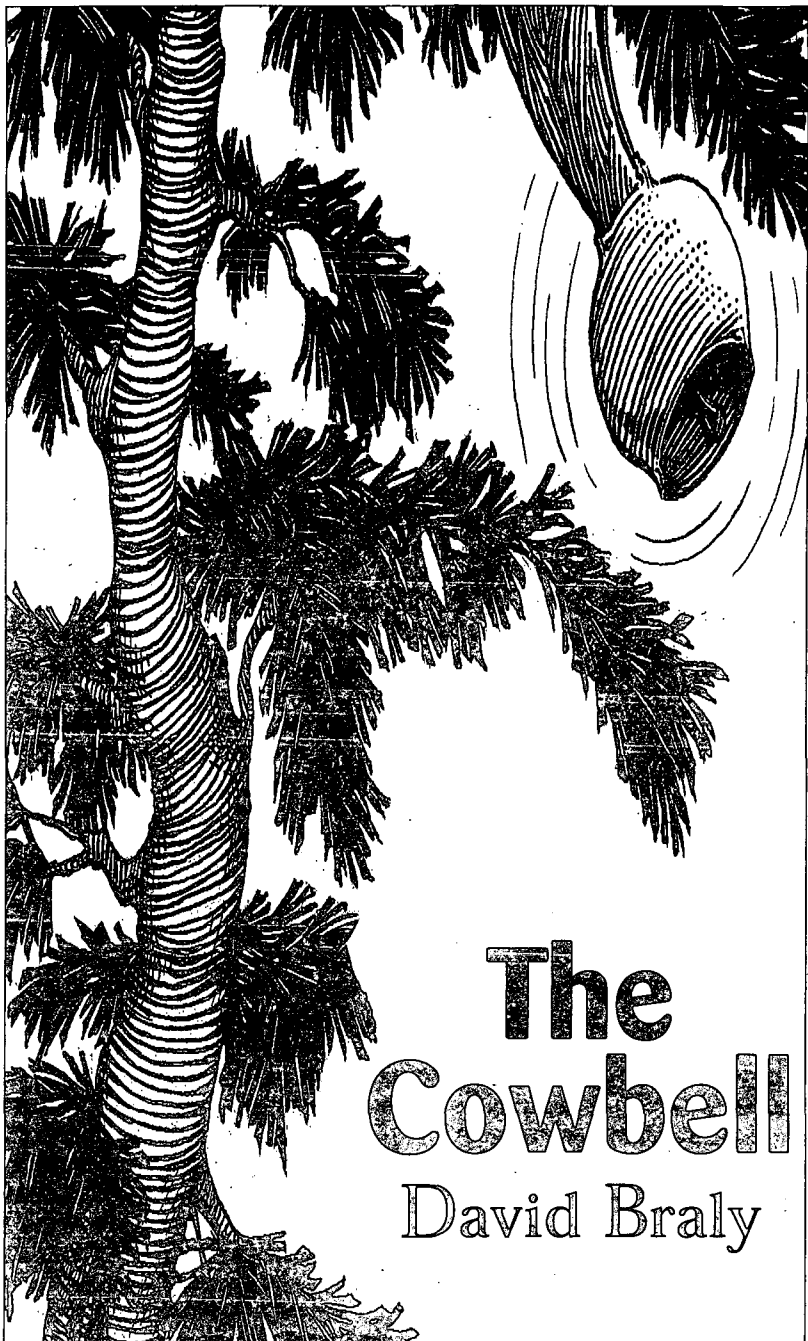


Illustration by Tatjana Mai-Wyss

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/02

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When Jim Gunnell first came among us nothing hinted at the discord that would result from his presence. The widower was a retired farmer in his seventies who made friends easily and casually, although he was not aggressive in establishing relationships.

The neighborhood was pleasant. Not especially upscale, but pleasant. There were young couples, middle-aged people, and many elderly retirees like Jim. Most of the houses were single storied. Some back yards had patios, most front yards had concrete driveways. Almost every property had a back fence against the alley, but few had fences to separate them from the neighboring yards or the quiet residential streets. Garages and carports sheltered clean, undented, often new cars, pickups, and minivans. There were more motorboats than motorcycles. Children were safe skating in the street. Trees, shrubs, and flowers grew abundantly; in summertime the neighborhood was darkly green with vegetation. The trees were of many species and, like the houses, of varying ages.

Two years ago Jim had bought the white clapboard house next door to mine. Built before World War II, it was among the neighborhood's oldest. Its lawns were a bit wider than others in the area, and the green shingled roof was somewhat higher. A great variety of bushes and flowers grew there, and the trees were the oldest and tallest on our block. Two great

ponderosa pines dominated the back yard, towering over a Douglas fir and ancient Chinese elm. Three birches, two cedars, four handsome blue spruces, a big-leaved maple, an apple tree, and two more elms grew elsewhere on the property. They blanketed the house and yard with a dark, cool, appealing shade during summer. Unfortunately, some of them blanketed our own yard with a snowlike fall of wind-blown leaves during autumn.

Wind was another feature of our hilltop neighborhood. Almost every afternoon a gentle breeze that missed the city's lower elevations blew across it. A welcome feature during hot summer days.

"What are those noises?" Jim asked me one day. He had strolled over to watch me repaint my boat. He was leaning against my car beside the boat, his arms folded over his chest. A lanky man with iron grey hair, he wore his habitual garb: a long-sleeved cotton shirt, old blue jeans, and scuffed-up old cowboy boots. "I hear them every time the wind blows. Sometimes even when I'm inside the house."

I stopped painting and listened. I heard only the breeze whispering through the upper branches of the trees, a few wind chimes, and the normal distant summer sounds: children playing, traffic, a power lawnmower.

"I hear nothing unusual," I said. "What does it sound like?"

"Sort of like disjointed music or the tinkling of bits of glass or metal. It comes from several directions at once."

I listened again. "You don't mean the wind chimes, do you?"

"What are wind chimes?"

An American adult who didn't know about wind chimes? It seemed impossible. I had grown up next door to a house with a set mounted over the back door. I had heard wind chimes all my life.

I explained them to Jim. When I had finished, he related that not only had neither he nor any of his neighbors on ranches in eastern Oregon ever owned wind chimes, he had never before heard of them.

"We had the cowbell," he added.

I wasn't such a city slicker that I didn't know what a cowbell was. I had seen them in movies and in magazine illustrations advertising dairy products. I even knew that the purpose of hanging a loud bell around the neck of an in-offensive cow was to help the farmer locate her out in the pasture. What I did not understand was how the memory of a bell hanging around a cow's neck would invite comparison to a wind chime. Perhaps my explanation had not been sufficiently lucid.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"We had an old rusty cowbell hung on a lower branch of a big pine tree about a hundred feet behind the house. Big old tree. Bigger than those two in my back yard here. Wind gusts rang the bell. Not steadily, just now and again. You wouldn't think that an old cowbell could produce such a sweet sound as it did when ringing in the company of the wind. I

heard that bell all my life. When the wind blows now I miss it."

I understood Jim's nostalgia. We normally want good and familiar things to remain the way they are: an obsolete radio; a certain model of a now classic automobile; the hometown the way it looked, sounded, and moved the year we graduated from high school.

I'd forgotten how some people seek to restore the past in order to recover what they've lost. I was reminded a week later.

As usual, Kathy and I had gone to bed shortly before midnight. The day had been sunny and warm, but forecaster Jennifer Colline said that a cold front would arrive during the night. No thunderstorms this time, but cloudy skies and scattered showers. And tonight, she warned, strong winds. I went to bed thinking that the wind would help me sleep soundly.

Clang! . . . Clang! . . . Clang!

The harsh noise intruded upon the depths of my unconsciousness, and then upon the lighter sleep that had replaced it, until finally, suddenly, it dragged me into full awakeness. And the metallic clanging continued, while the house was walloped and braced by gusts of wind.

I had no idea what the clanging was. None. My first thought was that the wind had dislodged something that was hitting against something else, but I had not a clue what those two somethings might be. The digital clock showed 3:42 A.M.

Kathy stirred beside me.

"What on earth is that noise?" she asked sleepily.

"I don't know. The wind's blowing, but—"

"It isn't the wind. You'd better go check."

Reluctantly I got up, drew a bathrobe over my pajamas, and slid my feet into slippers. The clanging continued as I walked out of the bedroom.

"Dad." Kevin was awake. "What's that noise?"

"I'm sure it's nothing important. Go back to sleep."

"As if."

I flipped on the overhead light in the living room and walked through. The clanging continued without pause.

I unlocked the front door, opened it, and stepped out onto the porch. The night felt cold for summer. The wind was piercing. The clangs were coming from behind the house. I strolled around to the back yard. I saw the Yaegers' house directly across the alley suddenly light up. Despite the late hour, I could see four houses with their lights on.

I couldn't be sure exactly where the clanging came from.

I closed my eyes tightly, turned around several times to disorient myself, and then listened. I turned myself toward the sharp clangs and, eyes still shut, pointed directly at where I heard the noise.

I opened my eyes.

I was pointing at one of Jim's big pine trees.

That's when I knew. And I did

know, not merely suspect. Although I had never heard a cowbell before in my whole city-dwelling life, I realized instantly that it could be nothing else.

When I returned to the bedroom, Kathy was propped against the bed's headboard, wide awake. The end table's lamp was on. I removed my slippers and robe and climbed back into bed.

"Well?" she said irritably. "What's causing the racket?"

"Just a cowbell," I said. "Go back to sleep."

"A cowbell! What's a cowbell?"

I explained everything.

"Well, he'll just have to take it down, that's all," she said when I'd finished. "We can't have continual banging coming from next door every time the wind blows."

"The tree's on his property. Legally he can hang whatever he wants to on it. But I'm sure he'll be reasonable. He probably had no idea it was going to make such a racket."

She turned off the lamp and we both tried to go back to sleep.

Impossible. Knowing what was causing the noise did not help us to adapt. Moreover, the wind was blowing from the west, the direction of Jim's house, carrying the sound right to us. Nothing—not even tossing and turning, not putting the pillows over our heads, not lying there trying to force ourselves to enjoy the clanging, provided relief. By the time dawn illuminated the eastern curtains, Kathy was whispering over and over again, "I'll kill him, I'll kill him, I'll kill him."

Usually breakfast in our house is noisy. Conversation, jokes, and ribbing abound, especially between Kevin and his fifteen-year-old sister Caitlin. Not that morning. Breakfast was consumed in grumpy silence. Kathy and Kevin both had headaches, and instead of cutting her waffles, Caitlin more or less hacked them to pieces. Outside, the bell continued to clang.

"Who in their right mind does this sort of thing?" demanded Caitlin at last. "I mean, like, in America at the start of the third millennium where does one even find a cowbell?"

As I was walking out to the car to go to work, I saw Jim carrying his garbage can out to the curb for the trash collectors. I had carried ours out last night, but I went over anyway. If, as I suspected, the new feature had not turned out as Jim intended and he planned to remove it, I could go back and tell Kathy the good news.

"Morning, Jim," I called. He had just placed his can down next to ours.

"Good morning. Looks like it's gonna be a cool one."

"Yes, at least for this time of year."

"Say, do you hear my new cowbell?"

"I think everybody for a mile hears it."

"Best darned idea I've had since I married Lena back in 1947." A broad smile had formed on his lean face. His grey eyes were sparkling. "It's amazing how mel-

low the sound of a cowbell sounds when it's ringing in the wind."

Right then I realized that we had trouble.

"Frankly, Jim, it kept us awake all night."

I'd expected Jim's jaw to drop, followed by an apology coupled with assurances that the bell would be muffled or removed.

Instead, he smiled and, turning back toward his house, said, "Oh, well, you'll get used to it."

Leaving me to wonder what we would get used to: the bell's jarring clangs or our lack of sleep.

When I returned from work that afternoon, I found that the wind had slackened a bit, but the bell continued to clang. Kathy said that she had talked with Mildred Yaeger and Ann Corrin and informed them of the source of the noise they were complaining about. Both had been awakened in the same manner as we, and their families also had endured a sleepless night.

That night our problem was not being awakened, but getting to sleep in the first place. The wind continued, just strong enough to keep the clangs coming at regular intervals. We kept trying to discover some way to use pillows as earplugs. Kathy again repeated, "I'll kill him. Tomorrow I'll really kill him!" while I responded with a helpful, "Try to discover music in the sound."

But it was no use: cowbells aren't musical.

While I was at work the following day, the neighborhood rose against the cowbell. Ann Corrin

drafted a petition. She soon learned how far the noise had traveled. Everyone east of us for a third of a mile was eager to sign. She also obtained signatures from people living north, south, and even west of the cowbell. Altogether, 137 signatures. She asserted that if it had been a weekend, when more people were home, she might have tripled that number.

Until now no animosity had existed between Jim and the neighbors. This changed abruptly after Mrs. Corrin handed him the petition. The broad smile which had greeted her at his front door vanished as he read it. And it was then that we learned what a stubborn, headstrong, contrary cuss Jim Gunnell really was. He ripped up the petition and ordered Mrs. Corrin off his property.

Mrs. Corrin wasted not a moment. Plenty headstrong and stubborn herself, indignant that Jim had ripped up the signatures that she had spent most of the day collecting, she marched home and phoned the police.

An officer visited Jim and viewed the offending bell, but could only recommend that Jim try to get along with his neighbors. The cowbell, of course, was as legal as the wind chimes. The episode only strengthened Jim's determination to keep the bell because the police visit seemed to intrude upon his legal right to do so. It had become a matter of principle. Nothing is better calculated to induce animosity than someone having a principle in

conflict with everybody else's peace of mind.

When I arrived home, a gentle afternoon breeze was floating through the neighborhood, accompanied by an occasional *clang!*

I witnessed the next act in the drama from my back yard. I was studying a basketball-sized wasp nest attached below a corner eave, wondering how it came to be there without risking my hide. Jim was also outside, on my side of his house, adjusting his old television antenna in the latest attempt to improve reception.

Suddenly a man whom I had seen occasionally but did not know came down the alley. A husky, broad-faced, crewcut red-head in his late twenties, he was hurrying along with a determined look on his face and steady purpose in his steps. When he reached Jim's back gate, he flung it open and headed toward the pine tree where the cowbell clanged intermittently from the lowest branch.

He grabbed the cowbell, tore it off the branch, and flung it hard—and loud—to the ground. When Jim rushed around to investigate, the man yelled, "And don't put that damned thing up again!"

Jim didn't say anything, whether because of fear or simple astonishment I don't know.

But he was not slow to act after the fellow had departed (glaring at me for some reason as he marched briskly down the alley). Jim immediately replaced the

bell. He then studied it for a moment. He took it down and laid it on the ground. He went round to the other side of the house, and returned carrying a steel extension ladder. Pulling it out to its full length, he selected a strong, very high branch and leaned the ladder against it. After testing the ladder against the branch a few times, he picked up the cowbell and began climbing. He went up about twenty feet. There he attached the cowbell to a branch.

The cowbell clanged for the remainder of the afternoon. I expected to see the husky fellow come down the alley again, but he never returned.

Fortunately, there followed a period of windless days and nights. The bell was quiet. Not one single clang.

Tempers cooled.

The bell began clanging again after a week of silence. This time, however, a big blow did not inaugurate the din, only normal afternoon breezes. Intermittent *clangs!* came with strong gusts. Perhaps only two or three clangs a minute instead of thirty or forty. Still irritating, but no longer intolerable. We could sleep.

This is not to say that people didn't continue to complain and threaten. They did. Kathy heard talk that the first time Jim left town on a trip, a couple of men planned to steal the cowbell. It would never be heard from again. The pair ignored both the risk of police involvement and the very real probability that Jim would

just go out and buy another cowbell. My concern, with my recently acquired knowledge of his combativeness, was that he would retaliate by buying and hanging a whole slew of cowbells in his trees. But I need not have worried. Jim never went anywhere. The conspirators never had a chance to remove the bell. And so it continued to clang. And clang. And clang. Its racket became as constant a feature of our afternoons as the breeze itself.

The first week of September a powerful thunderstorm rolled very slowly over the region. Torrential rain, sheets of marble-sized hail, roaring gusts of wind—it had it all.

"It's sure pouring," Kathy said. She was standing at the open door looking through the stormdoor at the rain pounding the street. I was seated in my armchair listening to it. The kids were playing backgammon on the dining room table. It was only six o'clock, but because of the storm the house was dark except for the overhead light in the dining room.

"Do you realize," I asked her, "that it's been more than a month since our last thunderstorm?"

"Listen to that cowbell ring. It's worse than that first night."

About eight twenty the storm knocked out a transformer, plunging our part of town into darkness for more than two hours. We could have lit the candles we kept for emergencies, but we had no idea that the outage would last so long. From minute to minute, we expected the power to come back on.

I sat in a chair facing the open front door, staring out into the blackness while I listened to the rain pound against street and roof and leaves. Infrequently, the headlights of a passing car momentarily lit up the wet street, but for the remainder of the time, everything was eerily dark and unfamiliar.

There was a loud noise from the direction of Jim's house. That was not an unfamiliar sound to me.

"What was that?" asked Kathy. "It sounded like a branch or a tree snapped."

"No. Just the end of the bell."

"What do you mean the end of the bell? It's still clanging away like crazy."

I didn't answer.

We continued to sit listening in the blackness. Kevin stumbled back into his room and turned on his transistor radio. He turned it to KNX, the Los Angeles station

that plays old radio programs for an hour each night starting at nine o'clock, and he shut the door to listen to it while the rest of us listened to the storm.

"It's kind of nice once in a while, isn't it?" said Kathy. "Just sitting in the dark and hearing the rain and the thunder and thinking about things."

"Yeah."

"What are you thinking of?"

"A shootout I once witnessed between the police and a check kiter who didn't want to go to jail. We were coming home from school when I was fourteen, Ray, Keith, Joe, and I, and we almost stumbled right into it. We had to wait there behind a house while the gun battle raged for over an hour. Then the cops killed him."

"What on earth made you think of that?"

"Something I heard."

"Oh, you mean the thunder."

I let her think so.

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THE ADVENTURE OF THE CHESTNUT VENDOR

Anne Weston



Major Appleby's warm hearth had not prepared me for the piercing chill of the November night. My mind, lingering over anecdotes from our days in India, was loath to accept the London street outside his door.

A hansom cab awaited me at the kerb. Having said my farewells to the major, I hurried aboard and we swung into motion. I pulled my coat about me against the cold that seeped through the leather seat.

I peered out the window. We left the major's sedate neighborhood and entered an area of narrow and dimly lit streets. Old buildings, dismal in shades of grey and black, loomed to either side. The hour was well past midnight. I saw no one.

The drive to Baker Street would take the better part of an hour. I leaned back and immersed myself in memories of that hot and colorful land where I had served with the major.

An abrupt stop jolted me back to the present. I felt the driver jump down from behind and heard his muffled curses. He walked forward and squatted by the cab horse's foreleg.

I let myself out and joined him.

"Blasted loose cobblestone," the cabman snapped, jerking his head toward the pavement. "This horse won't take you no further tonight, sir."

"I hope the leg isn't broken." I knelt and ran a hand over the horse's cannon bone.

"Nah, he can put a bit of weight on it, sir." The driver began removing the horse from the traces. "T've

got a pal with a mews near here. I'll lead the beast there and let him rest a few days."

I glanced around the smoke-grimed neighborhood. "Would your friend have a boy and dog-cart for hire, by chance?" I asked.

"Fraid not, sir. But Haverton Lane's just around the corner. Busy enough street. You wait here while I go whistle up a cab. Be back with it in no time at all."

I blew on my hands. My old wound ached from the cold. "Never mind, cabby," I told him. "If you'll direct me, I'll step over there myself." The exercise would stir my blood.

The driver hesitated. "You know this part of town, sir?"

"I'm sure I can find my way." In fact, I had never been there before. But if I could find my way about Afghanistan, India, and other exotic lands, I could certainly traverse a few blocks in civilized London.

With such conceit we dig our graves.

The cabman shrugged. "If you say so, sir. Quickest way on foot is to turn right at the next corner, bear right again at the Y, and take the second left—a kind of alleyway. Then you'll see a set of old stone stairs going up to the right. They'll bring you out on Haverton Lane. Won't take you a moment to hail a cab there, sir."

"Good luck to you and your horse, cabby." I gave him a few coins and walked briskly toward Haverton Lane.

The following half hour is



painful both to remember and to admit. I fear that my mind, drowsy with the major's excellent after-dinner brandy, confused a right with a left in the cabman's directions. Eventually realizing that I had lost my way, I attempted to retrace my steps, only to find myself in a debris-strewn dead end.

I paused, listening for footsteps (of a constable, I hoped), but heard only a faint trickle of water from some sewer, best left unseen. A moist fetid smell told me the river was nearby.

Again I struck out walking. At the least it stopped my shivering.

An occasional pale light showed in an upper room, but such was the neighborhood that I preferred to struggle along on my own rather than risk attracting unwanted attention by calling out or pounding on a door. Like a skittish horse, I edged past each dark doorway with trepidation. I wished I had my army revolver in my pocket. When dressing for the dinner, I had not dreamed I would desire a weapon before the evening was out. The penetrating chill of the night did seem to be keeping the slum's denizens indoors, for which I was grateful.

I am embarrassed to say that it was not entirely human evildoers whom I feared. The conversation at dinner had covered the world. We had discussed the situation in the Ottoman Empire. We had analyzed Bismarck's latest actions regarding the Balkan problem. We had considered de Lesseps's current attempt to

build a canal across the Isthmus of Panama. And finally, the talk had turned to various mystic Eastern tales of djinn. Then, seated with congenial companions around the major's laden table, candlelight flashing off the chandelier, those legends had made charming conversation. Now, in this labyrinth of dank alleys and shadowed overhangs, they exerted a regrettable grip on my thoughts. I hastened my steps.

At the next crossway I looked left. Not half a block away leered the lurid red eye of a hump-backed ogre.

Once my heartbeat slowed, this monster resolved into a familiar and welcome sight: a chestnut vendor beside his cart with its glowing charcoal brazier. My demon was but an honest working-man, bearing the frigid night to succor wanderers such as I.

I dashed to his side so quickly I must have startled the poor man, for he jumped back. Indeed, he was perhaps fortunate I did not throw myself into his arms.

"At last!" I cried, then calmed myself. "I am very glad to see you, my good man. I have been lost, you see."

The man, small and thin, stepped forward and squinted at my face in the dim light cast by the brazier. "Lost?" He gave the word a foreign twist.

I held my hands out to the heat of the cart. Freshly roasted chestnuts made a glossy mound on its top. Beside them was a stack of newspaper ready for chestnut-wrapping.



"My cab had an accident. I am looking for Haverton Lane in order to find another," I explained.

The man said nothing.

I curbed my impatience. Perhaps he had not understood.

I simplified my question. "Where is Haverton Lane?"

This time my words were understood. The man answered as though by rote; I supposed he often had to direct lost passersby. "Behind you. Up the stairs."

I looked around. A worn stone stairway cut through the crowded building. "Thank you," I told him. "And I'll take a packet of chestnuts, please." Though I was not hungry—the major had brought his superb cook back from India—they would warm my hands on the cab ride home. I could not think what I had done with my gloves. Also, the fellow deserved something for his fortuitous presence.

The man searched my face again. Perhaps he still harbored some doubt as to my sanity. Finally he pulled out the bottom sheet of newspaper from the stack, twirled it into a cone, and tossed in a handful of chestnuts. I paid him and hurried up the stairs, feeling like Orpheus ascending from his sojourn in the underworld.

Haverton Lane, while hardly bustling at that hour, was at least well lit. Within minutes I secured a cab. Once inside I clutched the chestnuts on my lap, absorbing their heat with both hands.

No further obstacles impeded my journey. The cab soon drew

up at Baker Street. I climbed the stairs and entered our sitting room with considerable relief.

I found Holmes sprawled upon our sofa before a cozy fire. I stepped past him, avoiding a retort that lay discarded on the floor, and stood at the hearth.

"You have been extending your kindness to one of London's cab horses, I perceive," he commented, after a quick glance at me. "I trust the animal was not seriously injured."

I concealed my surprise. "No, only lamed by a poorly set cobble."

"I observed the street dust upon the knee of your trousers. You could have knelt by an injured pedestrian, of course, but would not have acquired that smear of liniment on your cuff. The pungent smell is unmistakable."

"Oh, I see." Holmes's deductions were so obvious when explained. "I should have wished it had happened in a better neighborhood," I added.

"Yes, that area between Haverton Lane and the river is hardly advisable even in daylight."

"Come now, Holmes!"

My friend allowed himself a smile. "The trace of silty mud on your boots is distinctive of a riverside area. As to Haverton Lane, I happened to glance out the window as you arrived. I have noticed your cab several times in Haverton Lane—it has a painted-over patch that catches the light. Since the common route between here and the major's house intersects Haverton Lane near the river, it was no great feat to suppose that



that was where you ministered to the cab horse."

"I suppose not, now that you explain it. At any rate, I did spend a rather unnerving half-hour there when I became disoriented."

"I am glad you found a chestnut vendor to direct you at last."

I refused to ask how he knew this.

"The bulge in your overcoat pocket, combined with the fragrance of roasted chestnuts, could mean nothing else," Holmes continued. "You are a symphony of informative odors tonight, Watson, if you will pardon my mentioning it. I refrained from referring to the faint breath of muck accompanying the river silt."

"I might have met the chestnut vendor before I became disoriented," I countered.

"After dining on the major's curry—you have a speck of turmeric yellow on your shirt-front—you would not have bought chestnuts without good reason. You became lost first, then bought them in gratitude to your savior. And regarding those chestnuts, Watson, if you do not plan to eat them, pray give them to me. I was caught up in an interesting chemical analysis today, and I believe I neglected to eat. I seem to recall Mrs. Hudson scolding me through the door because I turned her dinner away."

"You missed one other reason that I purchased the chestnuts," I said, passing him the packet.

But I could not catch him out. In the blink of an eye he replied,

"Of course you also wished to warm your hands on such a bitter night. You came in without your gloves."

"You have not been outside to know how cold it is!" I cried, exasperated. "You are in your dressing gown, and I venture to say that you have not been out of it today."

"My dear Watson, I observed how bundled up the cabman was. Now do not press me for more deductions, as I am bound to err soon, and I do not wish to flaw my image in the eyes of my chronicler."

I seated myself in an armchair, basking in the heat. Holmes munched chestnuts and tossed the shells into the fire.

"How did your experiments go?" I inquired.

"Well, and poorly. Well, because I finished them and the results were as I had expected. Poorly, because I am left with no puzzle to occupy my mind." His restless eyes darted about the room, as though searching for some new distraction.

"I am glad you did not blow up our rooms before I reached home and warmed myself," I said, not entirely in jest.

Holmes laughed. "I would not be so inconsiderate of you, Watson." He ate the last chestnut, crumpled the paper, and flung it into the fire.

A stranger in the room would have sworn that Holmes then went mad. He sprang up, crying out, "The poker, Watson! Pull it out!"



Before I could react, he leapt past me, kicked the wadded newspaper from the fire, and pressed a sofa cushion upon it to smother the flames.

"I told you I would soon err," he said, crushing with his foot stray embers that had scattered about the floor. "A pretty little problem placed right under my nose, and I failed to see it. Let us hope it is not too late." He removed the cushion and picked up the newspaper.

The paper was charred along one edge but otherwise intact. Holmes placed it upon a side table and smoothed it out. I stood, somewhat reluctantly, and moved over to look.

"Observe, Watson."

"I see nothing but an outdated article on trade."

"The ink smudges, man! Read the message!"

I now noticed various small spots of ink among the words. I held the paper close to the lamp. "The pressman was not paying attention," I said. "I don't see that they form words."

"Not the blots themselves, Watson, the words above each blot."

I again peered at the paper. Above the first smudge was the word "buy." I followed the column of print down a few lines and found a blot below "all." I had to skip to the next column to find another smudge by the word "bark." A line below, I saw one at "from" and another below "arriving." The last smear was under "middle." "Buy all bark from arriving middle," I read aloud. "It

makes no sense, Holmes. I am sorry to spoil your hopes for a new problem, but these blots must have happened by chance in the printing process."

With the flourish of a magician, Holmes whipped the paper over and pointed triumphantly to a tiny scrawl in the margin. "The missing words, Watson."

I did indeed see three words written there: "Veronique Vandever" and "February." I inserted them into our jumbled phrase. "Buy all bark from Veronique Vandever, arriving middle February," I said. "The sentence does make sense now, but I see nothing sinister about it."

"Nothing whatsoever—except that those involved felt it necessary to go through great convolutions to pass this very simple message."

"How did you come to realize it was a message?" I asked.

"I observed the ink smudges on the inside of the cone as I picked out chestnuts. As the words formed no intelligible sentence, I, like you, decided they were accidental products of the printing process. But as I crushed the paper I saw handwriting on the outside. My hand was quicker than my brain, unfortunately, and threw the paper to the fire before I realized the significance of what I had seen. Now, Doctor, tell me everything that passed between you and the chestnut vendor. Every word, every gesture." He sat down, leaned back, and gazed at the fire through half-closed eyes.

I gave as thorough a summary



of that brief meeting as I could. When I finished, Holmes fell into a brown study.

I, too, sat back and endeavored to interpret the cryptic phrase. I pondered the name Veronique Vandever. A lady of French and Dutch extraction, I supposed, sophisticated, worldly. "Bark" could be a code word for something to be smuggled into England, or for stolen goods. Or what about fraudulent stocks? I thought of the South Sea Bubble.

At least we had plenty of time to puzzle it out before the lady arrived in mid-February. Perhaps Holmes, with his vast skein of informants stretching through all layers of London society, could ascertain who she was. She might even appear in his index. I would inquire in the morning.

Holmes did not appear to hear my good-night when I retired.

The next morning I perused the news while eating breakfast. "What do you think of the French efforts to construct a canal across the Isthmus of Panama, Holmes?" I asked, laying down the paper.

"If de Lesseps succeeds, it will revolutionize both ocean shipping and passenger travel. If he succeeds . . ."

"You harbor serious doubts?"

"I believe a canal will eventually connect the Atlantic to the Pacific. Too many ships and men are lost on the journey around Cape Horn, not to mention the time that would be saved by cutting thousands of miles off the trip. The need for a canal is too

great and there is too much interest among the great powers. But can it be built at this time? Many men have already died in the attempt."

"Yes, malaria and yellow fever have taken a terrible toll," I agreed.

Holmes steeped his fingertips together.

"History does not record the names of those who could have succeeded in their chosen enterprise if they had had access to some invention or discovery that came after their time. Perhaps this canal cannot be built until civilization learns some presently unsuspected aspect of medicine or engineering. Take, for example, the malaria problem. Surely there is some way to control it."

"Quinine, of course, is effective," I pointed out.

"Yes, it has saved countless lives. But what is the source of these jungle fevers? I have come to doubt the common beliefs—that they are a miasma arising from the swamps, or transmitted by something crawling about the floor, or even that they pass from one person to another. And there is something about the usual hospital practice of leaving bowls of stagnant water around the bed-legs of malaria patients that raises my hackles. I cannot help but believe there is some heretofore unsuspected agent of transmission involved in the devastating spread of these diseases . . . some agent so common, so ever-present in tropical zones, that it is overlooked in the search for a root



cause . . . something like a dog, a cat. Or smaller—a rat—even more ubiquitous and unnoticed . . . you don't suppose it could be a mos—"His voice drifted off. I returned to my newspaper.

A few minutes later Holmes spoke again, more briskly this time. "Someday, Doctor, I will devote myself to unmasking this killer who slaughters millions every year. But not today. Are you busy this morning, Watson?"

"I have nothing planned."

"Would you step round to the chemist and bring me these items?" He handed me a list of various powders and preparations. "I wish to start on a new line of chemical investigation today. You would oblige me greatly by going for them."

"Of course." I finished eating and departed on my errand.

Though most of the substances were common, two or three took the chemist some time to prepare. Close to an hour had passed before I again approached our rooms.

A cab waited in front. Perhaps Holmes had a new client. I quickened my steps.

The driver was at the horse's head. He glanced over as I passed. "Beg pardon, sir, would you be Dr. Watson?"

"Why yes, I am."

"Your uncle's waiting inside the cab. I'm to take you both for a drive."

"I am not expecting any uncle."

"Long-lost uncle, he said, sir." The cabman lowered his voice.

"And if you ask me, you'd be better off if he stayed long-lost, if you know what I mean. Looked you up just to put the touch on you, I'd say. Picked him up a few blocks away—wouldn't a stopped, but he jumped inside like it was his own private carriage and him the king of Spain."

I realized that the quickest way to straighten out the confusion was to confront the individual in question. I looked inside.

A bedraggled figure slumped in the corner. It wore a battered hat, pulled low over the face, and a torn overcoat that was none too clean.

"Sir," I began, "I'm afraid there has been some misunderstanding."

"You'd turn away your old uncle?" croaked the figure. "I dandled you on my knee when you were a wee lad, and now you're ashamed to be seen with me?"

From the corner of my eye I could see the cabman hovering, ready to come to my aid.

"I expect you have me confused with some other Dr. Watson," I said. "If you'll tell me your nephew's full name, I might know of him."

The huddled shape leaned forward, out of the cabman's sight, and lifted the brim of his hat. Familiar keen eyes gleamed at me from beneath bushy grey brows.

I groaned at my own naivete.

"Everything all right, sir?" the cabman called from behind me.

"Yes," I replied. "I have now recalled my uncle. You may proceed." I stepped aboard.



"You know I must have my little jokes now and then, Watson," Holmes said, chuckling. "In addition, you serve as an excellent test for my disguises. If they can pass muster with you, who know me best, I am satisfied that no one will see through them."

I appreciated my friend's effort to turn my gullibility into a compliment, but could not conceal a trace of irritation. "I suppose you simply made up that list for the chemist in order to have me out of the rooms while you prepared your disguise."

"Not at all. Should my explorations this morning give quick results, I shall be back to continue that new train of research this afternoon."

"You say 'your' explorations—but I am with you."

"Only to show me the stairway below which you found the chestnut vendor."

"I can take you to the man himself, if he is there at this hour."

"No, no. You must not approach him again. In fact, I must ask you to keep well back from the window, and to cover your face when we are near."

"Very well."

We travelled in silence for several minutes.

"Have you interpreted the message?" Holmes inquired.

"I do have a few thoughts on it." I outlined my ideas.

"Hmm! A continental adventure, smugglers, and financial intrigue, Watson?" Holmes said when I had finished. "You have been reading the more sensa-

tional of our daily papers lately, I fear."

"Give me a better interpretation, then," I said with some spirit.

"Let us imagine that Veronique Vandever is the name of a ship," he said.

This had not occurred to me. "That may be, I suppose. You should be able to verify that through a shipping office."

"I plan to do exactly that, Watson. Now here is Haverton Lane. Watch for those stairs."

We turned onto the thoroughfare. I leaned forward. Mindful of Holmes's warning, though, I put a hand to my face.

"Very soon, I believe," I told him. A moment later I added, "Here."

Holmes waited till we had covered several more blocks and were near no pedestrians. He rapped sharply on the cab wall. The cab slowed but did not stop. "I will join you when I can, Doctor," he said, stepping out with the cab still in motion. "The driver will return you and the chemist's package to Baker Street."

I settled back against the seat and thought. A ship, Holmes had said. Could "bark" refer to a sailing bark? That would be a valuable enough item. In that case, though, why mark the words "all" and "from"? It would be much clearer to tell someone "Buy bark arriving middle February." And again, why such secrecy? Perhaps the prospective buyer did not wish the owner to know of his interest—an old rivalry, say, or to

keep the price down. But such business could be accomplished through an agent without revealing the name of the principal. I shook my head. I would put aside the puzzle until Holmes returned.

My curiosity was forced to remain unsatisfied that day, however. I read by the fire until late, battling Morpheus, but at last gave up and went to bed.

Upon sitting down to breakfast the next morning, I found a humble clergyman sipping coffee across from me.

"Good morning, Holmes," I greeted him. "Was your expedition yesterday successful?"

"It was most informative," he replied. "I watched the chestnut vendor until after midnight."

"What happened?"

"Nothing whatsoever."

"Did he make many sales?"

"Not a one."

"And that was informative?"

"Quite."

"I may be obtuse, but in what way?"

"It indicates that the chestnut business is a mere sham."

"Why do you suppose—"

"You will excuse me, Watson, but I cannot take time to explain. I have several errands to do. Then I must hurry to the bedside of an ill and impoverished old gentleman. Mr. Harold Hornbull, I am told, is dying."

"I am very sorry to hear that, Holmes," I exclaimed, somewhat confused. "Is he an acquaintance of yours? If there is anything I can do—"

"Thank you for your concern, Doctor, but I only learned of his existence yesterday, when I inquired about the neighborhood for someone like him. I will toss you this bone: Mr. Hornbull resides in a small room directly above the chestnut vendor's cart."

With that Holmes drained his cup and departed.

Throughout the day a number of telegrams arrived for Holmes; I assumed the telegraph office had been one of his errands. I resisted temptation and left them unopened. I did keep them ordered by time of arrival, and collected them on a side table.

Holmes, still dressed as a clergyman, returned at a more decent hour that evening. Looking rather tired and chilled, he picked up the telegrams and went to his bedroom. He soon emerged in slippers and purple dressing gown and settled in an armchair.

"Physical exertion is rarely so taxing as sitting all day by the side of the dying," he said, extending his legs toward the fire. "And I must say that not the least of London's crimes is our complicity in allowing the elderly poor to pass their last days in cold and neglect."

"You have spent the day with Mr. Hornbull, then? Did he not wonder that a poor clergyman could spare him so much time?"

"Conveniently for my disguise, he was none too clear in his mind about the present. He was delighted to have someone listen to his tales of growing up in Yorkshire some seventy years ago. He



did not care who I was, or why I was there."

"What did the vendor do today?"

"Again, nothing. He could not have chosen a worse location to set up shop. The area's residents buy chestnuts from a popular, long-established vendor who operates a cart a few blocks away. Few outsiders venture down that alley."

"If you are not too tired, Holmes, would you tell me in more detail what you did after I left you in Haverton Lane yesterday?"

"There is little more to tell. I descended the stairs. No vendor was there, so I wandered about the neighborhood until he appeared at dusk. He remained in the one spot. In my character as a harmless half-wit, I kept an eye on him until the church bells struck a quarter to one. At that time he wheeled his cart toward the river. To avoid causing suspicion, I did not follow him through the deserted streets." Holmes glanced at me. "I need not explain why I am watching him."

"You hope to observe the individual for whom the message was intended. Do you think the vendor realizes he gave the paper to the wrong person?"

"I would imagine that he is uncertain. Your question, 'Where is Haverton Lane?' was probably the prearranged password by which the vendor was to recognize his contact. Should an innocent passerby ask the question and receive the paper, as you did, no harm would be done. The buyer would simply discard the paper

after eating the chestnuts, never realizing it held a secret communication."

"So the vendor could have several copies of the same message prepared," I mused, "and give one to anyone who said the right words."

"Precisely, Watson. My Baker Street boys will follow the vendor tonight and discover his lair. I am almost more interested in the identity of the intended recipient. He is someone who fears he is followed, and must contrive to receive the message unsuspected under the very nose of the follower."

"What makes you guess that?"

A flash of irritation passed across my friend's face. "I never guess, Watson. I collect facts, and once I have sufficient, I deduce. As new facts emerge, I mold my theory to fit them. In this case we have few facts. I must extrapolate from them based on what would lead me to create such a method of communication."

"And that would be—?"

"Let us call the man who wishes to contact the vendor the 'hare.' His follower shall be the 'hound.' The hare knows he is watched by the hound, who suspects he is involved in some affair contrary to the hound's interests. The hare's concern is that the hound not learn exactly what he is plotting. Therefore, the hound must not find out with whom the hare is meeting. The hare needs to set the hound on a false scent. What would I do if I were the hare? I would go to a dubious location—



such as a vile-looking public house I noticed around the corner from the vendor's cart—and appear to make surreptitious contact with someone there.”

“You would, perhaps, whisper your order to the barman while looking nervously over your shoulder?” I asked.

“Exactly. Then I would depart. As I made my way through that maze of confusing byways, I would pretend to become lost, and contrive to pass through that alley. Upon sighting the chestnut vendor, I would loudly demand, ‘Where is Haverton Lane?’ thus identifying myself to him without arousing suspicion in the hound. After receiving directions, I would buy chestnuts and leave. The hound would think the rendezvous had occurred in the public house, and turn his attention to those I had spoken to there. Only the most astute observer would suspect that my brief, casual encounter with the chestnut vendor was the critical one.”

“Such a meeting could only work once, though,” I pointed out. “The hound would become skeptical if on another occasion the hare visited the same vendor.”

“You are right, Doctor, and you remind me that I have not shown you one further point about that chestnut wrapper.” He stepped to the mantelpiece, lifted the Persian slipper, and removed the charred paper from under it. “I confess that I failed to realize the significance of this when I first examined it,” he continued, indicating a notch cut into one edge.

I looked at the notch. Like an arrow, it pointed to the phrase “St. James Hall” where it appeared in an advertisement.

“The next meeting place!” I exclaimed.

“I believe so. Probably the vendor remains a certain number of evenings in one spot, passing the message to whoever gives the password—whether accidentally or intentionally—then moves to the next place to receive the reply.”

“Not as a chestnut vendor, however. That would raise questions in the hound’s mind.”

“Quite so, Watson. He may become a newspaper seller, a beggarly match vendor, anything that would allow casual contact with a stranger.”

I thought of something. “In the dark that night, I could not see the vendor’s face well enough to be sure of recognizing him again. How could the hare be certain of whom to approach in a crowded area such as St. James Hall?”

“They likely have some pre-arranged cue, such as a coat of a particular color or a hat of a certain—of course! His cravat. I am slipping, Watson.” Holmes slapped his head.

I struggled to recall the vendor’s clothing. “The night I saw him, I believe the vendor wore a white cravat with a dark stripe through it.”

“That’s it. He wore it yesterday and today, too. I wonder—” Holmes fell into silent thought, chin sunk on chest.

I took a lighted candle and started for my bedroom. I stopped



at the door, struck by a sudden thought. "I beg your pardon for interrupting, Holmes, but I could call at a shipping office tomorrow regarding the *Veronique Vandever*, if that would help your investigation."

"I inquired this morning," he replied, raising his head. "The *Veronique Vandever* is indeed a cargo vessel, currently en route from India to South America."

I felt a surge of excitement. "Where will she be in February?"

"Various ports on the Atlantic coast of South America, finishing up at the Isthmus of Panama. Do not feel left out of this investigation, Watson. It is entirely due to you that I became acquainted with the chestnut vendor. I suspect, Doctor, that you have unearthed one of the most diabolical plots I have ever encountered." His chin sank back upon his chest.

Though my curiosity was intense, I did not have the heart to disturb him again.

I was awakened the following morning by the excited piping voice of a small boy coming from our sitting room. From past experience I knew it was one of Holmes's Irregulars reporting. Had there been a development? By the time I dressed and left my bedroom, however, the boy was gone, and Holmes was busy scribbling out telegrams. I did not interrupt him.

He looked up when Mrs. Hudson brought in our eggs and ham. "Are any of your kitchen knives in

need of sharpening?" he inquired of her.

Accustomed to her lodger's habit of asking seemingly irrelevant questions, she simply replied, "I dare say I could find a few that want touching up, Mr. Holmes."

"Splendid. If you would be so kind as to wrap them in paper, I will pick them up shortly after we have consumed this excellent breakfast."

But Holmes ate little. As soon as our landlady had left, he leapt up and moved about the room, humming a melody from Gounod's *Faust*. Passing the mantelpiece, he pulled out the knife which pinned his correspondence, enfolded it in his handkerchief, and pocketed it. Next he located our scissors on a side table where they were propping up a row of test tubes. He even found my pen knife where it had fallen behind a sofa cushion and asked to borrow it.

"Are you preparing for battle, Holmes?" I finally inquired. "I should be glad to accompany you."

He laughed. "There is no one I would prefer to have by my side, Doctor. But these items are only part of my disguise for today."

"I regret that I cannot see it complete," I commented. "I must call at my bank this morning."

"I hope to have news when I return," Holmes told me as I prepared to leave.

More telegrams arrived for Holmes during the day. At mid-afternoon a grimy but polite boy whom I recognized as one of



Holmes's street Arabs showed up with a note scrawled upon a scrap of theater program that looked as though it had come from the gutter. The note, in my friend's handwriting, asked me to send any telegrams with the bearer, along with a set of clean clothes.

Holmes did not return home that night. After lunch the next day, another Irregular came to collect his telegrams.

A prior obligation required me to dine out again that evening. Soon after dinner, I made an excuse and left. I hoped to reach our lodgings in time to see Holmes return in whatever character he had assumed.

He had reached home before me, however, and was pacing about the sitting room in the clothes I had sent with the boy. His eyes glittered with excitement.

I noticed my penknife gleaming in the gaslight, lying beside the scissors on a side table. Holmes's knife shone brightly from the mantelpiece. I observed the evidence and drew a conclusion. "You've been a scissors-grinder!" I exclaimed.

Holmes smiled. "You are right, Watson. You may soon surpass me in the detective business."

"I doubt that," I said, though I must admit I was flattered. "But what would you have done if someone had appeared and asked you to sharpen his knives?"

"Why, I would have sharpened them. Look at your penknife."

I picked up that article and tested it on my thumb. Snatch-

ing my handkerchief from my sleeve, I staunched the sudden flow of blood and admitted, "It's like a razor! Don't tell me that the sharpener's trade is another of your hidden talents?"

"Several years ago I investigated a small matter for a scissors-grinder," Holmes explained. "He insisted on paying me, though his problem was so curious I would have solved it for nothing. I knew he could not afford my fees, so I had him teach me his trade to work off the debt. I knew it would someday be useful. Yesterday the grinder lent me his cart for a few days. With that, a false beard, and tinted eyeglasses, I believe I was unrecognizable as either the half-wit or the clergyman."

"It appears you have made progress in the case."

"Indeed I have! My street Arabs have outdone themselves. I know the identity of the hare. I have allied myself with the hound and his employer. I have learned the antecedents of the chestnut vendor. I know the motive and the plan."

"Will you go to the police now?" I asked.

Holmes shook his head. "The case would be laughed out of court as preposterous. It therefore falls to me and to you, Doctor, to prevent a most fiendish act."

"I may assist you, then?"

"I rely on your presence. Can you be ready to pay a call with me at the unseemly hour of nine o'clock tomorrow morning?"

"Of course. What sort of place



are we to visit? Shall I bring my revolver?"

"Bring it, by all means. Our antagonist would not hesitate to eliminate us, if he could do so without endangering himself. We will be calling upon Mr. Winfree Grant."

I was aghast. "Winfree Grant! But he is one of England's most prominent businessmen! He has investments on every continent! He is respected throughout the banking world!"

"And he has mortgaged his soul to the devil."

"Preposterous! Are you certain?"

"Have no illusions, Doctor. Mr. Grant has set into motion a plan of consummate evil. Tomorrow you and I must dissuade him from his scheme."

"Well, I will trust your judgment," I said, reluctantly.

"I know you would be insulted if I offered you the chance to back out of your commitment to accompany me. Now, you had better turn in so as to be alert in the morning."

I retired but could not sleep. All night I heard Holmes pacing about the sitting room. I tossed and turned. Mr. Winfree Grant had invested in immense engineering projects—bridges, dams, irrigation systems—in a dozen countries. His name appeared throughout the society pages. How could he be involved in some scurrilous plot? I could not imagine.

I drifted off towards dawn and was awakened by Holmes's voice calling to me that the hour was

late. Fragrant odors wafted in to me from Mrs. Hudson's breakfast, already laid out. I barely had time for a bit of tea and toast, though, before we had to dash off.

Before jumping into the cab, Holmes took our page-boy aside and handed him a bulky envelope. I heard only a few words: "—at the Foreign Office if we are not back by noon."

As the cab rattled through the streets, Holmes sat crouched forward on the seat, reminding me of a falcon with its prey in sight, only waiting for the right moment to drop upon it.

We reached a fashionable suburb. Holmes did not speak until we were turning through imposing gates that gave a vista of an old stone manor house. "You will follow my lead, Watson?" he asked.

"Of course."

We drew up at the front.

A surprised butler opened the wide, heavy door. Over his protests Holmes insisted that Mr. Grant would indeed see us and at last prevailed upon the butler to take our cards in. I noticed that Holmes had scribbled a few words on the back of his.

We were shown into a parlor paneled in rosewood. About the room I observed framed photographs of, I presumed, Mr. Grant with various dignitaries. A large silver presentation cup was displayed on a shelf. I read the engraved words: "Presented in appreciation to the Honorable Mr. Winfree Grant, by —— University."



Not two minutes had passed when a tall, distinguished gentleman I recognized from the photographs entered the room. I was suddenly embarrassed at our brazenness. Surely Holmes was for once mistaken.

The man closed the door behind him. "I am Winfree Grant," he said brusquely. He did not offer to shake hands.

I then realized he was controlling himself with difficulty. Every muscle in his face and neck was tensed like strands of steel. His hands were clenched so tightly the sinews stood out in white ridges. His eyes flicked between us, then rested on Holmes with frustrated rage. We remained standing.

"I see that you recognize my name and comprehend the purpose of this visit," Holmes said.

"Yes." The word was like a rifle shot.

"Allow me to summarize the situation," Holmes continued. "Mr. Ferdinand de Lesseps, as the entire world knows, accomplished the impossible several years ago by constructing the Suez Canal. As everyone also knows, he is now attempting an even greater miracle at the Isthmus of Panama.

"Whoever succeeds in building a canal from the Atlantic to the Pacific, eliminating the costly, dangerous, and time-consuming trip around Cape Horn, will have the world at his doorstep. Fame, fortune, a lasting place in history shall all be his. Mr. Grant, in 1881 you were offered the opportunity

to invest in de Lesseps's company and turned it down, not because you doubt his abilities, but because you wished to attempt the same undertaking with your own company for far greater profits. But in order for your company to take over the contract to build the canal, it is necessary that de Lesseps fail.

"Permit me, Mr. Grant, to pose a question to my companion, Doctor Watson. Doctor, what is the greatest obstacle to de Lesseps's success?"

I collected my thoughts. "Engineering problems and unexpected costs are among his difficulties. But in my opinion, his greatest foe is tropical disease. A canal cannot be built without laborers. Laborers cannot work if they are dying of malaria."

"Doctor, is there a cure for malaria?"

"Yes, certainly. Quinine."

"What is the source of quinine?"

Grant's scheme suddenly revealed itself to me like a dark lantern unshielded. "Fever bark!" I exclaimed, then controlled myself to appear less surprised. "Also known as Peruvian bark or Jesuits' powder. The bark of the cinchona tree."

A faint smile flickered across Holmes's face and I knew I was proceeding according to his script.

"This cure may be administered in various forms," Holmes went on in his most pedantic tone. "As the isolated alkaloid quinine, or crudely, under primitive conditions, simply as the powdered bark. At times, this bark is ad-



ministered but fails to effect a cure. Why, Doctor?"

"Because the percentage of quinine in the bark varies from one species of the cinchona tree to another, or even within the same species, if the trees grow under different conditions," I said. I ventured a glance at our host. He stood like a statue carved from ice.

Holmes's gaze burned into him. "Mr. Grant, a shipment of fever bark is to arrive at the Isthmus of Panama on the *Veronique Vanderveer*. This bark was harvested from trees of exceptionally high-quality bark in Colombia. The exact location of this grove remains a closely guarded secret among the forest Indians to avoid over-exploitation of the trees. That shipment is already on a mule-train, traveling through the Colombian mountains to the port of Cartagena. It will be loaded on to the *Veronique* when she docks there.

"You, Mr. Grant, were looking for just such a shipment. When your confederate the chestnut vendor learned that one was scheduled to travel on the *Veronique*, he arranged with accomplices that a quantity of worthless bark would be purchased from a plantation in India. That bark was loaded onto the *Veronique* when she visited Bombay. The high-quality Colombian bark will be put aboard in Cartagena and thrown overboard by your hirelings once the ship reaches the open ocean.

"On landing at the isthmus, the

worthless bark will be accepted as genuine by desperate doctors, hospitals, and patients.

"If your scheme succeeds, Mr. Grant, countless scores of human beings will die. Do you deny this?"

"You have no proof." Winfree Grant spat out the words.

"That is correct. I have no proof. You may have heard, sir, of some little reputation I possess, or heard rumors of persons in high places who are deeply indebted to me. I do not like to boast of this, but I will say that these rumors are not exaggerated. I swear to you, Grant, that unless you desist in your monstrous plan I will call in all the favors that are owed to me. If you invest in diamonds in South Africa, your every shipment will somehow go astray. If you choose to construct a dam in Canada, the government will confiscate your machinery and deny your permits. If you purchase a spice plantation in Ceylon, bandits will plague you. I will not stand by while you murder humble workingmen. I will devote all my skill and energy to ruining you."

I had never seen my friend so angry. He and Winfree Grant glared at each other like a cobra and a mongoose.

Holmes spoke one more time. "Incidentally, Mr. Grant, if Dr. Watson and I do not return to our lodgings by noon, you will think all the dogs of that hell to which you belong have been unleashed upon you."

At that Grant shivered as though his last hope was gone. "I



am familiar with your reputation, Holmes, though I do not believe everything I hear," he said coldly. "After considering the matter in depth, however, I have decided not to pursue whatever plans I may have had for investing in a waterway across Central America. I do this not from any fear of you or the powers you claim, but as a simple business decision based on logic. Geography, disease, and climate create insurmountable obstacles to the construction of such a passage. I choose not to throw my wealth away in a futile attempt to construct one. A canal will never be built across the Isthmus of Panama."

"Time will tell, Mr. Grant. Human ingenuity is an astonishing thing. Now, regarding your situation: you will direct your accomplices to destroy the worthless bark from India and allow the correct shipment to be loaded in Colombia. You may pass your instructions openly now. I have spoken to de Lesseps's man, who as you know has been following you. He will not interfere as long as you are undoing the evil that you have set in motion. My contacts on the isthmus will verify that the shipment that is unloaded there is indeed the correct one."

Grant's lips compressed to a thin white line. "Very well." He made a sudden movement which caused me to reach into my overcoat pocket for my revolver, but he was only turning to pull the bell.

Grant pivoted back to face

Holmes. "How did you find out?" he demanded.

"It was not I, but my colleague Dr. Watson here, who exposed your plot," Holmes said.

Grant looked at me in disbelief. The butler appeared before he could press Holmes further.

With the butler's entrance, Grant revealed that he was on the verge of losing all control. "Show them out before I kill them," he muttered to the astonished servant.

I did not feel secure until our cab had pulled through the gates and left Mr. Winfree Grant's estate well behind. I could then contain myself no longer.

"Tell me, Holmes, how on earth did you ferret out such a fantastic scheme from so slight a clue as that chestnut wrapper?" I asked.

Holmes had returned to his usual phlegmatic self. He waved a languid hand. "I considered the many meanings of the word 'bark.' Among them was fever bark, a valuable commodity. When I learned that the *Veronique Vandever* was a ship coming from India, where large fever bark plantations have recently yielded disappointing results, bound for Colombia, where fever bark grows naturally, and then scheduled to visit the Isthmus of Panama, where fever bark is desperately needed, I began to wonder if some plot was afoot related to that meaning of 'bark.'"

"My suspicion grew as my Irregulars followed and identified



the parties involved: first, the chestnut vendor. He proved to be a bad lot. The riverside public houses are full of talk about him. He is newly arrived in London from Marseilles and has already made a name for himself as a clever man without scruples who will arrange anything for the right price.

"I sent telegrams to every corner of the earth. At first, I merely inquired of my correspondents in tropical zones for any odd gossip related to fever bark. I learned that a particular cinchona plantation in India had recently come into production and discovered that their trees produced a bark with a concentration of quinine so low it was not worth extracting . . . interestingly, the plantation had just made a large sale of this worthless bark. Further investigation tracked this sale to an individual known to have worked for the chestnut vendor.

"A correspondent in Colombia informed me that a shipment of high-quality fever bark was on its way from the mountain slopes to a Cartagena warehouse, to await the *Veronique Vandever*. This shipment was supposed to go to the Isthmus of Panama.

"I now suspected that a substitution would be made.

"I proceeded to make a list of possible enemies or business rivals of de Lesseps's and made inquiries about each. Winfree Grant's name appeared on this list. Telegrams to those acquaintances of mine most knowledgeable about finances revealed that

Grant had shown great interest in de Lesseps's canal project when it began but had then turned down the chance to invest in it.

"Not long after dark on my first day as a scissors grinder, a well-dressed gentleman came striding down the alley. He looked confused and out of patience, just as I had predicted. He stepped up to the chestnut vendor and demanded, 'Where is Haverton Lane?' He then purchased chestnuts, ascended the stairs, and took a cab. Unbeknownst to him, he was shadowed by one of my street Arabs. When the boy informed me later of the hare's address, I knew that Grant was my man.

"Another of the Irregulars followed the hound that same evening. Once Grant reached his home, the hound gave up the chase for the night and went to a cheap lodging house. I presented myself to him there early the next morning, in the clothes you had so kindly sent to me.

"Once I convinced the hound of my credentials, he told me that he was employed by Ferdinand de Lesseps. Mr. de Lesseps's suspicions had been aroused, the hound explained, by the many instances of 'bad luck' plaguing his efforts in Panama. Suspicion pointed to agents of Winfree Grant, who, de Lesseps knew, wished the glory and profits of a successful canal for himself. But there was no proof, and no way to predict where Mr. Grant would strike next. De Lesseps dis-



patched the hound to England to find out more.

"Grant had come up with the idea of killing off as many canal workers as possible by switching worthless bark for good. Through a middleman he made contact with this man from Marseilles. He did not wish a face-to-face meeting at first for fear of exposure. They arranged for that peculiar method of message-passing, as Grant feared he was followed. The vendor worked out the details of the plan, finding a ship with the desired route and arranging for persons in the various ports to carry out the necessary maneuvers. The vendor then located a section of newspaper containing the words required for his message, marked them, and set up his cart in an agreed-upon spot."

"But, Holmes," I interposed, "having arranged for the worthless bark to be sent to the isthmus, why would the vendor need to send that 'buy all bark' message to Grant?"

"Canal workers are not the only ones dying of malaria in Central America, Watson. Once that bark was unloaded on the isthmus, a number of buyers would fight to purchase it. The shipment would be split. Some would go north, some to the Caribbean Islands, and some would be hoarded or held for speculation. Only part would end up with canal workers. To guarantee the greatest blow to de Lesseps, Grant had to know to purchase that particular shipment and see that it was all channeled to canal hospitals.

He would have the wealth to beat out other buyers."

One other point puzzled me. "What did you write on, your card?" I asked.

"Three words: 'regarding fever bark.' That reference, combined with my name, was enough to tell Grant the game was up. On the whole it was quite simple."

"You have averted a great wrong today, Holmes!" I exclaimed.

"But I am left at loose ends, Watson. You must find me a new problem."

Little remains to be said. Under Holmes's scrutiny, Winfree Grant gave up his attempt to meddle with the *Veronique Vandever's* cargo.

As we all know, de Lesseps's grand vision became mired in what I believe was undeserved scandal and in '89 his company went bankrupt. As far as Holmes could determine, Grant did not have a hand in this.

More than twenty thousand human beings succumbed to disease during that gallant attempt to connect the two oceans. Had it not been for Mr. Sherlock Holmes, however, this figure would have been even higher.

Holmes entered into correspondence with a Cuban doctor who held the strange belief that tropical diseases were transmitted by mosquitoes. I did not keep up with their letters.

Some years after de Lesseps was forced to abandon his dream, Holmes received a much-traveled



envelope from one of his correspondents in a far-flung corner of the Empire. From it he withdrew a tattered newspaper cutting. His eyes narrowed as he read it.

"In my line of work, Watson, it is often difficult to believe in any kind of ultimate justice," he said, handing me the cutting. "For that reason I treasure items such as this."

The article was from an English newspaper in Malaya. "Deceased," I read aloud, "Mr. Winfree Grant, after a long illness. In the Straits Settlements, August 3, while there to review a possible investment in tin mines. Of malaria.'"

Holmes took the cutting and filed it in his index.

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the November issue.

At 07:35 on Saturday, July 15, Patrolman Roller stuck his head in at the door of Chief Sheehan's office. "Dan," he said, "I just got a call from some guy who says a woman's been stabbed at Rose Terrace on Floravale Avenue."

"Look into it, Pat," the chief of Dayton police said. "Could be a domestic violence case. Or maybe a false alarm. Did the caller sound lucid?"

"More excited than anything, sir. He didn't come across as a nut."

"Take a run out to that apartment house and radio back if you need assistance."

Pat Roller knew the way to Rose Terrace quite well. He'd been out there several times lately. As he drove down Floravale Avenue, he recalled what the place was like. Just five floors to the old, narrow brick apartment house, with a couple from a different state on each floor. Each of the husbands followed a different profession; the man who'd reported a break-in last week was an architect.

The patrolman pulled up out front and looked around. In the rose garden beside the building were gathered six men and four women, all looking down at something on the ground.

Roller approached and spotted the caretaker, old Vic Vinson, a familiar figure from past visits. Roller called him aside. "Vic," he asked, "what's going on here?"

"The lady from Texas has been stabbed. She's a-lyin' right over yonder among my rose bushes."

The woman was definitely dead. She lay face down, a long-bladed carving knife embedded in her back.

"Okay," Roller began, taking charge of the situation, "who reported this?"

A slightly bald man stepped forward. "I'm a dentist. I'm the one who phoned your headquarters just after the killing."

"How do you know it was right after the murder?"

(1) The dentist replied: "Mr. North lives just below the gentleman from Tennessee and just above me. We three men were waiting for the rest of our jogging group to assemble whe we heard a horrible scream. I went to investigate; Mr. North was right behind me. A few

minutes later we found her, just as she is now. I checked her pulse; it faded out even as I held her wrist. She didn't utter a word. We looked around but saw no one running away. I left others, including Mr. Olson and my wife, to guard the scene.

(2) The old caretaker cleared his throat. "I didn't kill nobody, sir. At 7:10 I got a complaint about a leaky faucet on the top floor, which took a half hour to fix. That lets me out. Now, if you want to know who's paying rent here now: in addition to the third-floor gent, there's Edward, Irene's husband, the banker, and Mr. Lange.

(3) The man from Utah spoke: "I live just above Janice, who has the apartment just above the banker. This morning Janice joined my wife and me in guarding the body. We didn't touch anything, I swear. I saw Janice coming out of the building to join us." Then the banker stated, "Neither the man from Utah nor his wife could have killed the woman and circled back before I arrived."

(4) Mr. Olson was next. He declared: "Bryan lives just above Helga and just below me. We two men were together, and Helga came out to join us." Bryan added, "Every word he says is the gospel truth."

(5) Andrew said: "I live just below Grace, who lives just below Mr. Moore. We three were among the first on the scene." Grace and Mr. Moore nodded in agreement.

(6) The man from Virginia said, "As Mr. Kilmer can verify, I am not Freda's husband."

(7) The electrician declared: "My apartment is just below that of the man from Wisconsin. The victim wasn't married to either of us."

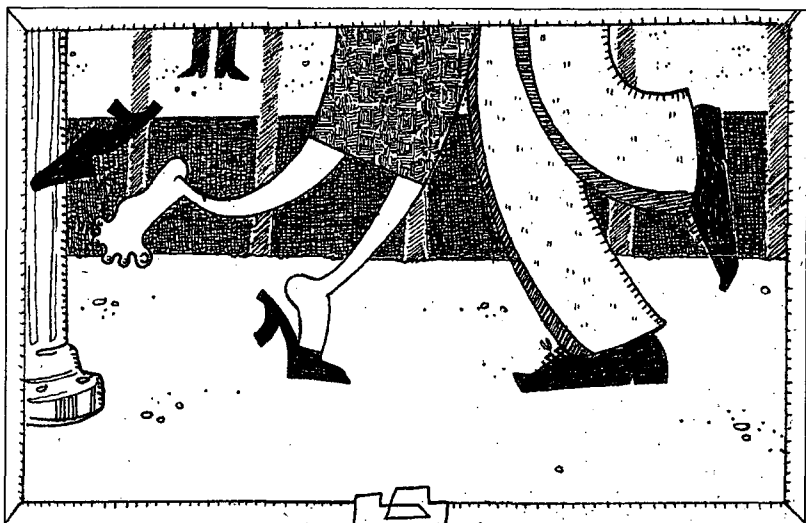
(8) Chester stated: "My apartment is somewhere above Delbert's. I am not the contractor."

As he looked over his notes, the patrolman ruled out suicide, for she couldn't have stabbed herself in the back with a long-bladed knife. No robbery was apparent. He concluded the killer was another resident of Rose Terrace. The murder could hardly have been a collusion between several persons. The guilty person was the one without an alibi.

Patrolman Pat Roller reviewed the statements once more, then stepped forward and arrested the killer.

Who killed whom that early morning in the rose garden?

See page 144 for the solution to the September puzzle.



Passing Feet

Geoffrey Hitchcock

It's an odd sort of life, this, living below ground level. Rather like a toad peering out from under his flat stone—that's the sort of view I get. A toad's-eye view—that describes it to a nicety. I have quite a big window, but it faces directly onto a stone wall about four feet away. On top of the wall are iron railings to stop people from falling into the alleyway. If I were to go up close and press my nose against the glass, I could peer up across the street where there are houses with basement windows and railings and steps leading up to front doors, just the same as the house I'm in. I used to do that sometimes when I first came to live here, but now from the big La-Z-Boy chair where I spend most of the day all I can see beyond the railings are the feet that pass by.

I've become very interested in feet and believe I'm a good judge of them. From observing the feet I construct the rest of the body. Not all that difficult when you discover what a variety of shoes there are. Smart, polished leather shoes, rubber-soled brogues, casual suedes, high heels with wobbly ankles, low-heeled nannies' shoes—each pair tells its story. Of course I don't get to see how my constructions come out, and maybe just as well. I would hate to find that any of the

lovely people I create are really glum, ill tempered, ugly, or self-centered.

Funny how I like to construct pleasant people, people who go by laughing and joking—even singing—their heels clicking merrily along. I don't hear the heels or the voices. For that matter, I don't hear anything any more, not from outside my head. Not since the day of the bomb. But inside my head I can hear. I can hear my thoughts. I can conjure up music. I have a great store of music in my head, and now that the awful ringing has almost gone, I don't mind my deafness so much. There was a time when I wished I'd lost my sight rather than my hearing, but now I don't know . . .

If I'd been blinded instead, I could've sat here and listened to the heels clicking and the voices laughing and singing and made up my bodies from that. But perhaps I wouldn't have listened to the heels—I'd have been too busy listening to the radio, to music outside my head, and to people talking. I would have been able to talk to friends and speak on the telephone. I could've been entertained all day.

But now I don't know. It's good to have sight, and I can see other things besides feet. I can see Nurse Plesant as she goes about her tasks. I can watch the moving figures on the TV screen and try to guess what they are on about. Later I will get that whatsit, teletext, so that I can understand better. And of course I can read—or will be able to when my burnt hands have healed and I can hold a book and turn the pages. I suppose I could do that now in a laborious way with my bandaged hands. I have a telephone beside me. It has a red light instead of a bell and Nurse Plesant has fixed a wire loop to the receiver so that I can insert my paw and lift it off its cradle and speak to it. If the red light comes on and I happen to see it, I pick up the receiver and say, "I am O.K., thank you. I hope you are well. Thank you for calling." It doesn't often happen.

I don't see much point to it, but the doctor insisted I have a telephone so that I can call my nurse if I need her. She has a flat in some other part of this old house, which is convenient. She is more or less my full-time private nurse, but she doesn't have to be with me day and night. I'd still be in hospital if that were the case. I have called her twice. Once she came and once she didn't. You see, I've no way of telling whether she answers the phone or not.

I used to think a lot about a person who placed a bomb in a department store. I had pretty bitter thoughts about him—or her. Then I began to wonder more, *Why me?* What was I doing there? I was standing by a rack of ties, poring over them. Why? I've got half a dozen ties and I rarely wear any of them. So why the sudden interest in ties that kept me at that spot for that vital minute? I woke to a red haze of pain and my head was full of noise, but it wasn't com-

ing from outside because after a while I could see doctors and nurses and I saw that they spoke but no sound came. . . .

Here comes Miss Jolly. I like her. She has lovely plump calves and her fat little feet are crammed into tight little shoes with heels so high that her ankles wobble alarmingly! She trots by with so much happy anticipation in her step. Is she going to meet her sweetheart or does she clasp a paper bag containing two cream buns?

People were kind to me. They worked so hard to heal me. I was an arrogant, opinionated know-all. Why did they take so much trouble with me? I wasn't worth it. My burnt flesh and broken bones healed to a point where I could go home—hospital beds are always needed. I am still very weak and helpless, but Nurse Pleshant is my strength. Every morning she comes and helps me out of bed, takes me to the toilet, cleans me, even brushes my teeth. She installs me in my big comfy chair and feeds me. She brings me tea and lunch and tea and dinner. She performs unmentionable tasks for me and eventually tucks me in bed for the night. She's a bonus I'm sure I don't deserve. She does all these tasks as if she enjoyed them. I've realized that if I changed the *h* in her name to an *a* and changed the accent on the syllables, she would be Nurse Pleasant and her name would exactly describe her. She's quite young—about thirty, I guess—and very average in size and looks, but her happy, pleasant nature sets her miles ahead. She's set up a blackboard and chalk so that she can talk to me. She tells me little jokes and bits of gossip.

I respond to her kindness by trying to be as little trouble as possible. Which isn't like me. I'm the one who blasts the overworked waitress if the service is a bit slow or the steak a bit tough. At least I was before the bomb. Now if pain comes in the night I will suffer it rather than reach for my phone. If it's done nothing else, it's provided me with a space to think in. . . .

Here come the Browns. He's supported on brown leather on heavy rubber, a bit worn down now. Her black leather low-heeled shoes, built for comfort rather than glamour, are still quite new. They move slowly, a trifle wearily. They are going home from the small shop they own to their flat a couple of blocks away where they will fry fish fingers and tomatoes and watch TV. They will hold hands comfortably while they watch the violence on the screen.

Thinking is all I can do. I've realized that there are two courses open to me: I can drown myself in self-pity or I can do something better. I've opted for the latter; Nurse Pleshant has helped to give me direction. I know that all I have to do is be patient and I will heal. I know that I'll always be deaf, so I must learn to turn that to my advantage. How to do that? I don't know yet, but I'm sure that if I keep an open and happy mind, that too will be solved for me. So I patiently watch the feet go by and imagine the happy faces belonging to them.

Here come two hippies in faded blue jeans with ragged cuffs. One pair blue sandals, one pair brown. One set red toenails, one set grubby. They saunter by and I know that they are holding hands and he has a transistor radio dangling from his shoulder. I refuse to hear it; they are transients and I won't see them again.

I insisted that it wasn't necessary for Nurse Plesnant to watch over me during the evening. You're young, I said, go out and have fun. I shan't get up to mischief while you are away. So I get her to turn my chair so that I can watch the feet. At first she was a bit reluctant. Remember what happened to Jimmy Stewart, she wrote, when he sat with his leg in plaster, looking out his back window. It's not the same thing, I said; he had a pretty wide view of things. I can only see feet. And don't worry about it getting dark, there's plenty of lamplight. . . .

I've been watching for a couple of hours now and most of my regulars have gone by. Miss Jolly, the Browns, Miss Glamour in her sheer stockings and expensive sandals, Mr. Spiv in his pinstripe trousers and black and white patents. And here comes Mata Hari, the beautiful Russian spy in boots so high I can't see their tops, on her way to seduce some gullible M.P. They've all passed by carrying their little secrets with them.

And now I'm waiting for my specials. They first appeared about ten days ago and have been along almost every night since. He wears brown suede shoes and light fawn trousers. Her neatly turned ankles are nylon clad and her pretty feet fit into blue court shoes with wedge heels. They don't pass by, they stop outside my window and turn so that they are side by side with heels towards me. Clearly they lean on the railings and talk. What about? Ah, the speculations! They stand there for ten or fifteen minutes, then—and this is the part I wait for—the shoes turn toe to toe and the blue courts rise off their heels. The goodnight kiss! Then they turn and move and are gone. Why do they stop there of all places? Because, I reason, she lives somewhere nearby. But why not say goodnight on her doorstep or inside her apartment? Because Mum and Dad or a flatmate are there? Seems likely.

Every night I watch the feet as hers rise on the toes and I watch to see if the shoes fall off. Do you remember that film where Maurice Chevalier, a wealthy industrialist, is lying dying of heart trouble? Actually, he's only got indigestion and a good burp puts him right in the end. You don't? I guess it was a long time ago and it doesn't matter. The point is he has a daughter who is engaged to Andy Williams. Maurice is worried because of his theory that when true lovers kiss the lady's shoes fall off. This doesn't happen with Andy, but it does later on with Robert Goulet. I remember it so well. No matter how long my lovers kiss the wedge heels stay firmly on. So, like Maurice, I have my doubts.

And I was right. One night the feet came as usual but there was no

lingering talk and no kiss. The blue foot stamped and moved away. The suede shoes hesitated a while then turned back the way they'd come. . . .

I didn't think that I'd see them again, but I was wrong—well, half wrong. The blue shoes came again but with them a pair of stout brown leather ones. The routine was the same: heels towards me—toes together, blue heels rising and—could I believe my eyes—the shoes were off! I could have cried for joy. I was still crooning a love song when my good nurse came in later to put me to bed. What's got into you? she chalked on her board. I didn't tell her but I could see my mood infected her.

This has been going on for the last two nights and now I'm waiting with eager anticipation and yes, here they come. They stop and turn—oh horrors! It's not the brown leather—its the suede again. I sense that something is wrong. The feet are not relaxed, they shuffle restlessly. Suddenly the toes are facing each other but the blue heels remain flat on the ground. They move wildly about—the knees sag, a blue-clad body sinks to the ground, the throat grasped by hands thrusting from brown tweed sleeves. A man's face follows the hands and for a moment two eyes look straight into my horror-struck ones that peer out between bandages. A look of fear spreads over the face and the hands relax their grip, and then I see another face, blue tongue protruding. It is Nurse Pleshant and I am sitting here watching her murder!

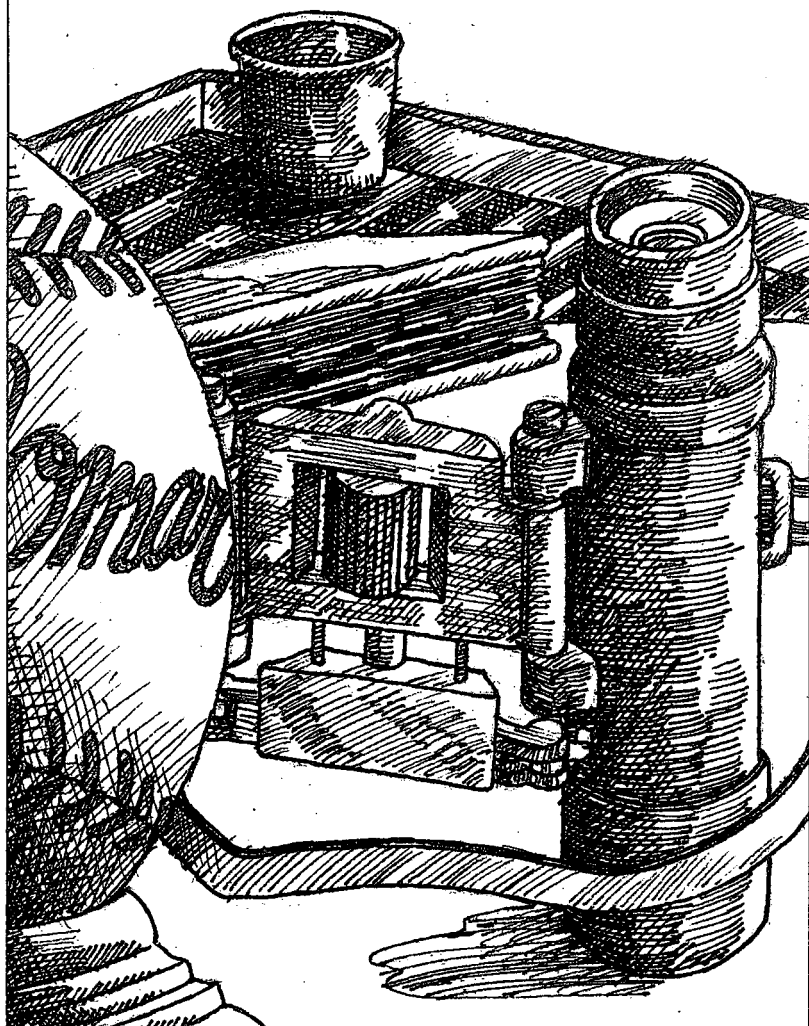
I reach clumsily for the phone, find the figure nine, and press it three times with the pencil stub my clever nurse has strapped to my other paw. I speak into the phone. "Do not ask questions—I am deaf and cannot hear you. Murder at fifteen Selwyn Street. Police and ambulance quick!" I repeat the message three times then I replace the receiver, lift it, and go through the process again. I shall keep doing this until they come. I have only to turn my head to the left to see the door handle turning. He's come for me, of course. But Nurse Pleshant has locked me in.

I pray she hasn't put the key in her handbag where he can find it. I wish I could hear the sirens. . . .

FICTION

BRER FOXX RIDES AGAIN

Sherrard Gray



Burton Foxx was watching a great blue heron in the swamp behind his office when the phone rang. He put down his binoculars, reached for the phone, and hesitated. It would be another applicant answering his ad in the *Elizabethville Gazette*. Wanted: Part-time assistant to a private investigator. 20 hrs/wk, possibly more. Must be good at office work and like puzzles.

Ten people had applied and he was thinking of canceling the ad. Especially after one caller had said, in a crude reference to a newspaper story last fall, "I'm inquiring about that job opening. Could I speak to Brer Foxx, please?" "Job's filled," Foxx had growled, slamming down the phone. The applicants weren't all disasters. Several were congenial and intelligent, but they struck him as pretending to be someone they weren't, nodding eagerly at everything he said. "That's right up my alley," or, "No problemo, someone's slow in paying, I'll put the squeeze on them."

One more try, he thought, picking up the phone. The caller turned out to be a graduate student at Lincoln College in wildlife biology looking for a part-time summer job. He had been hoping for a longer commitment but told her to drop by. Half an hour later a young woman walked into his office.

"Have a seat, Miss Martin."

In ten minutes he learned she was twenty-five, her father was a cop in Rutland, and she was

thinking of becoming a game warden or forest ranger.

"Redwing blackbirds!" she said, looking out the window at the swamp in back of his house. She noticed the binoculars on his desk. "Are you a bird-watcher too?"

"Half the time I don't know what I'm looking at."

She told him she had been relieved of her last job doing field work for a professor at LC when she refused to shoot a songbird.

"Shoot a songbird?"

"He thought it might be a new variant of a blackpoll warbler, said the only way we could be sure was to examine the skeleton. I told him I wasn't going to shoot it, and if he did I'd throw his shotgun into the Lamoille River."

"When can you start work, Miss Martin?"

Cheyenne Martin was good: good at bookkeeping, at getting foot-draggers to pay, at answering the phone. She was especially good at talking to police on the phone, maybe because her father was a cop, and with the help of the New York City PD she had located a runaway teenager in Greenwich Village. She did not smirk over his embarrassment last September. He had been hired to protect a woman from her abusive husband, who had just gotten out of jail. The woman had put Foxx up in a spare bedroom for the weekend. The husband crawled through a window, waking Foxx, who went after him, whereupon the husband went

back out the window, pursued by Foxx who caught his pants on the latch and fell into a rosebush, breaking his arm and prompting a rookie *Gazette* reporter to write, "BRER FOXX FALLS INTO BRIAR PATCH—Private Investigator Burton Foxx, hired to protect a woman on Battery Street . . ."

Foxx had wanted to strangle the reporter. Only once did Miss Martin refer to the incident and that was to say that "sometimes journalists get carried away with their own so-called wit." Nor did she make fun of the sap bucket in his office used to catch the drip from a leaky roof.

Two weeks after she had started working, the second homicide in Elizabethtown, population 3,000, in seven years occurred. The shooting would probably not affect Foxx professionally because it was a police matter. The victim, Victor Lamott, owned Wheeler Hill and a lot of other property in town. His house was less than a mile away, though in the three years Foxx had lived in Elizabethtown, he'd only met the man once—while tramping through Lamott's woods with his binoculars and a copy of Roger Tory Peterson.

But he was wrong about the murder not affecting him professionally. The next morning, Tuesday, a large woman with rhinestone glasses entered his office and identified herself as Tabitha Day, a cousin of the deceased's. "I'm afraid I don't have the utmost confidence in the Elizabethtown Police Department," said

Miss Day, after nodding to Miss Martin behind the pine desk that Foxx had picked up at a lawn sale and frowning at the sap bucket in the corner. "It's a known fact their chief has a drinking problem plus he smokes those disgusting cigars. I heard about you falling out of that window chasing a stalker and just want to say that it warmed my heart. People don't take risks like that nowadays unless they get huge sums of money. Are you interested?"

"I'm not cheap."

"Good."

"Any ideas as to who killed your cousin?"

"He was a saint." Miss Day smiled dryly. "Or seemed to be after his accident three years ago. He was a shrewd businessman and he was a Don Juan, and then he was in a terrible car accident and became a different person. He sold Lamott Granite, donated land to City Park."

"Stopped roving?"

Miss Day pursed her lips. "I'm not sure he went that far. I've heard rumors that he had a fling with his son's wife, Narelle."

Foxx whistled. "Tell us about his family. One of his sons lives not far from here. I've seen his log house in the woods on some of my rambles, waved to him once or twice. Not an overly friendly man."

"John's a bit of a recluse. He started a restaurant once but it went bankrupt. He became a granite carver, lost an eye a few years ago when he neglected to wear safety glasses. In spite of

having only one eye, he loves to fish and hunt. Last November John had a falling out with his father over hunting on Victor's land and far as I know has not been to Victor's since. You say you've seen his place, then you know what a pack rat he is, can't throw anything away. Especially money."

Miss Day gave a bleak laugh. "I went shopping with him once. When we came out of the store, fifteen minutes were left on the parking meter. We sat there until his quarter had expired just so no one else could use it."

"I thought I was cheap," said Foxx. "Other children?"

"Just an older son, Porter, also estranged from his father. And a mess, I'm afraid. A recovering alcoholic—at least I hope he's recovering. He looks like death warmed over. He's married to the Narelle I mentioned earlier, who, God knows why, seems to adore him."

"The boys' mother?"

"Joan. She and Victor were having a rocky—no pun intended—time." Miss Day heaved a long sigh. "Victor was one of those people who love humanity in the abstract but have trouble with people in the flesh."

"I'll be damned."

"Excuse me?"

"I said, 'That's interesting.' " After the visitor left, Miss Martin came over to his desk. "A real homicide case? Wait till I tell my dad. Can I go around with you? Off the clock, of course, you don't have to pay me."

"You're on the clock, and if you

catch the killer single-handedly you get a canned ham for a bonus."

Foxx had a good relationship with Chief Daryl Johnson of the Elizabethtown P.D. A year ago his favorite eatery, the Park Cafe, was robbed. He dusted for fingerprints where the police had neglected to and turned the evidence over to Johnson, letting him take the credit. Johnson owed him one and knew it. Also, they were both diehard Red Sox fans and had driven down to Fenway Park together to see a few games. Johnson knew Fenway's chief of security and last fall had wangled dugout passes for the two of them, and they had come back grinning like schoolboys, each with a ball signed by Nomar Garciaparra. So Foxx called Johnson and learned that the medical examiner estimated the time of death around nine Monday morning, and he got Johnson's permission to check out the crime scene and interview the widow, Joan Lamott. Next he gave his new assistant a lesson on how to dust for prints and look for hairs and other evidence.

The Lamotts did not live in squalor. A curving gravel drive led to a two and a half story house set in the middle of a wide lawn. A south-facing picture window near the upper end of the drive had a dime-sized hole in it.

"I'll bet they lose a lot of birds with all that glass," observed Miss Martin as they got out of the car and approached the house.

A slender woman in her early fifties whose smooth skin suggested a facelift or two came to the door. She wore Dacron slacks and a silk blouse, and her ash-blond hair was neatly permed.

Foxx had expected to see one or both of the sons there, but the only person besides Joan Lamott was an elderly lady in a wide-brimmed purple hat standing inside the door.

Mrs. Lamott nodded blankly as Foxx introduced her to Miss Martin. "I've seen you before," she said to Foxx.

"I bought a stone toad at your crafts store several weeks ago for my garden—such as it is."

"That's right. Ugly creature—but beautiful too, in a grotesque way." She seemed eerily composed. "You probably want to know what happened. I was at my shop yesterday from nine to two, got home around two thirty, and found Victor sprawled on the floor. By the way, this is a friend, Marion De Shields."

Foxx had heard of Marion De Shields, an eccentric living in a white-pillared mansion on the other side of Wheeler Hill. He had seen her bustling about town with a white-mustachioed gentleman trotting after her like a lapdog. Chief Johnson had once stopped her for speeding, and she had written a blistering letter-to-the-editor suggesting the police department should have better things to do than harass harmless citizens.

Something flashed in Foxx's eye, and he noticed a diamond the

size of a walnut on De Shields's finger. With a nod, he stepped past her into the living room with its handhewn beams and Swedish furniture. A yellow police ribbon formed a square around an armchair and an overturned coffee table, with objects strewn over the floor: magazines, a glass ashtray, playing cards, a bridge pad and pencil, a crumpled *New York Times*. Dark stains mottled the green carpet.

"Chief Johnson asked me to leave everything alone, at least for today," the widow said. "Victor was reading the *New York Times*, a daily ritual. That's a good way to go, isn't it? Quickly, while reading the *Times*?"

Foxx was staring at the score card. Four names were penciled on the card: "Marion/Victor" and "Etta/Chester," and there were numbers in the columns.

The old lady with the diamond came over. "That sheet is from the last game we played. Victor, myself, my husband, and our friend Etta Beaglehole play every Wednesday evening." She was old enough to be his mother but still attractive, early sixties he guessed, with blue eyes that sparkled almost as brightly as the diamond ring. "Do you play bridge?"

"Badly."

While the widow sank onto a sofa and Miss Martin knelt on the rug with a pair of tweezers, Foxx took Marion De Shields aside. "Any ideas?"

"Victor loved humanity, disliked people."

The cousin had said almost the same thing. "Is that a riddle?"

"His two sons could never meet his standards. But he gave money to the town, donated land to City Park, and had a place for skateboarders set aside in the park."

"Are you saying someone in his family might have done it?"

"There were times I thought of doing it myself. After his accident, he became too holy for my taste."

"But you played bridge with him?"

"Every Thursday night. Not a lot of options around here." She touched the investigator's sleeve. "We're looking for a replacement." As they moved toward the window with the bullet hole, his eye dropped to her diamond ring. She held it up for him to see, its facets sparkling.

"That's quite a rock," Foxx said.

"Yes, it is. But it comes with a terrible curse."

"A curse?"

"Mr. De Shields," said the old lady. "If you'll excuse me." She went back to the widow.

Foxx went outside to look around; from the angle between the hole in the window and where Victor Lamott had fallen, it looked like the shooter had been standing at the edge of the woods, but he found no footprints, broken twigs, or other signs. Through the window, he watched Miss Martin talking to the two women. She had Joan Lamott nodding, gesturing, opening her arms. The two would

probably be hugging when they left.

"You were married once, weren't you?" Miss Martin asked.

Foxx's head came up. "What makes you think that?"

"You have that lonely look of a man who was once happily married."

"You want me to lie down on a couch and tell all? Yes, I was married, and it was good, maybe too good, and then it fell apart and the terrible thing is, I still..." He toyed with the grass-stained baseball on its little pedestal on his desk.

"It'll happen again."

"Yeah." Long silence. "And you?"

"Not yet."

"Boyfriend, of course?" Foxx was a little disconcerted at how fast his heart was beating while he waited for her to answer. Get real, he told himself, you're ten years older, forty pounds overweight, and almost broke.

"I have a boyfriend in Rutland. Doesn't do me much good up here, though."

"No, I suppose not. So, who shot Victor Lamott? His wife?"

Miss Martin's jaw dropped. "Not Joan. I didn't care for her very much, but I can't believe she did it."

"All right, so what did you get from our visit to the deceased's house—besides the feeling that his wife didn't do it?"

Cheyenne Martin rose from her chair, took a cellophane envelope from the forensics kit, and dumped a pea-sized bit of gray

stone on his desk. "Looks like crushed granite. I found it on the rug by the sofa. Probably doesn't mean anything, but I didn't see any in the driveway or on the front path."

"Maybe I should be working for you instead of the other way around. But he was shot from outside. Does that mean the killer was inside with him, perhaps chatting in the living room, then went out and shot him?"

Miss Martin was excited. "He knew his killer then. Who do we interview next?"

"The married son, Porter, whose wife was rumored to be having an affair with Victor."

They pulled up a macadam driveway to the ranch house and parked. To the left was a two-car garage, to the right a fenced-in vegetable garden and a small shack. Beyond the shack stretched a swamp with cattails and sedge. In front of the garden four boys kicking a soccer ball stopped playing and stared at the visitors. Foxx did not see crushed granite anywhere. Outside the garage a tall, gaunt-looking man was washing a black Bronco. He turned off his hose and came over, coughing, a fist covering his mouth.

"Porter Lamott?" asked Foxx. "Sorry about your father. I'm working with the Elizabethtown Police Department. Mind if I ask a few questions?"

A woman in khaki shorts came out onto the porch then holding a clipboard and pencil, sunlight gleaming on her long red hair.

She looked ten years younger than the man. "I've seen you somewhere," she said, coming down the steps.

Foxx remembered seeing her just a couple weeks ago in one of his favorite places in town: City Park. You could get lost in the park with its woods and meandering trails, and its stretch along the Lamoille River. He'd been walking along with his binoculars and Roger Tory Peterson, enjoying the birdsong and scampering squirrels, and had come to the duck pond where two kids were playing with toy boats. She was sitting on a nearby bench, scribbling away on a pad of yellow lined paper. She had looked up as he passed, her eyes glazed with concentration.

"Mrs. Lamott? I'm surprised you recognize me. You were sitting by the duck pond, wrapped up in your writing."

The man stopped coughing long enough to pat his wife on the shoulder. "Narelle could write in the middle of a tornado."

But Narelle wasn't smiling. "Tabitha told me she'd retained you. I think that was pretty small on her part. Like one of us did it? This is something from Victor's past, from his days wheeling and dealing in the granite business."

"Easy, hon'," said Porter.

"Well it's true. Victor burned some people in the granite business." She looked at Miss Martin, as if noticing her for the first time. "Are you Mrs. Foxx?"

"N-no," said Foxx. "S-she's my assistant, Cheyenne Martin." He couldn't believe he was stutter-

ing. He also couldn't believe Mrs. Lamott's expression of amused sympathy.

A loud thump came from their right and Narelle spun around.

"Guys, easy on my shack."

"Sorry, Mom," called one of the boys.

She turned back, her hair flaring out like a red corona. "My writing shack, which Porter just built for me. I haven't been near the shack in two days but this afternoon I'm going to lock myself in. There's a window on the back side facing the swamp which Porter put in just yesterday. I can't wait to get in there."

Foxx told her about his swamp and they exchanged bird sightings, then he drew himself up.

"Uh-oh," said Narelle, "here come the nasty questions."

"Not nasty," said Foxx, who had taken a liking to this young woman, "but I have to ask where both of you were when it happened."

"Let's see . . ." Narelle ran a hand through her hair. "Our two kids were at a friend's house and I was at my desk upstairs. Porter was working at Aubuchon's."

"I haven't been to my father's in over a year," said Porter. "We aren't close."

The soccer ball bounced near the shack again and rolled across the lawn to Foxx's feet. He picked it up and threw it to a boy in baggy cargo pants.

"That's putting it mildly," said Narelle, her jaw quivering. "I know it's not nice to speak ill of the dead, but Victor was not an easy father."

"Honey."

"Damn it, Porter, Mr. Foxx and Miss Martin might as well know how I feel." Tears sprang to her eyes. "He never gave Porter a break, never said anything nice about him. He even called him a 'worthless drunk' once in front of our children." Tears flowing, she pushed her husband's hand away. "I'm going to finish and no one can stop me. Porter hasn't had a drink in two years. He's a gem, and I don't care how embarrassed he is to hear it, and his father was a jerk. When we were literally starving, it was Marion De Shields, bless her generous heart, who helped us out, not Victor. I hated him. There, I've said it. But I didn't kill him. Like Porter, I haven't even been to his house since last summer."

Foxx felt foolish. The idea that either of these two could have killed Victor Lamott seemed preposterous. He brushed his hands together and felt something on his palms; he glanced down and for a second just stared. When he looked up, Narelle was watching him.

"It's been a pleasure meeting you both," he said, and meant it.

His assistant nodded vigorously. "You take care," she said to Porter who was coughing again. "I mean—" She blushed. "—just take care. And good luck with washing your car. It looks beautiful."

When they were back in the Caprice, Cheyenne said, "I liked them both. And the best part is, I didn't see any crushed granite."

As they turned onto Factory Brook Road, she strapped on her seatbelt. "The shocks in this car are something else, Mr. Foxx." Laughing, she leaned her head briefly against his shoulder, and he thought, Please don't do that. They were silent until they reached his house and she bounced into the office. "I'm so relieved they're in the clear. Well, you're not exactly jumping up and down."

Foxx reached into his shirt pocket, extended his hand.

"A piece of granite? Where . . . ?"

"When I picked up the soccer ball it was wet and this stuck to my palm. The ball had bounced by the shack so I looked over and sure enough there was some crushed granite by the door. She said she hadn't been to the shack in two days, but Porter was there yesterday putting in a window. We'll have to check his alibi. By the way, we haven't talked about your salary. How's twelve dollars an hour?"

"Twelve dollars!" She was sitting at her lawn-sale desk, one of its legs propped up with a paperback mystery. "I haven't done anything yet. How about eight? You aren't rich."

"How do you know?"

She just looked over at the sap bucket in the corner, then up at a crocodile-shaped stain in the ceiling.

"I'm getting the roof repaired. Soon. And I do have money—or some anyway. I don't want to—" He was about to say "lose you," but instead said, "You're still a student. I don't want you to

starve. We need to interview someone at Aubuchon's where Porter works, check his alibi, some people in the granite business, and the other son, John. You want to tackle Aubuchon's and I'll poke around at Lamott Granite?"

He found the foreman of Lamott Granite, Jason Goudreau, at the main quarry on Almanac Mountain. Pneumatic drills whirled in the pit, a crane was loading cut blocks onto a flatbed. Goudreau, wearing a blue hardhat and cowboy boots, stood by a donkey engine talking to two workers.

"What's that?" shouted Goudreau over the noise.

Foxx flashed his badge. "Talk to you a sec?"

Goudreau walked over to a portable shack. "Yeah?"

When Foxx told him why he was there, Goudreau frowned. "I never had any problems with Victor. He could be a hard man, but did he piss anyone off enough to get killed? I doubt it. Must have been a burglar." The foreman shrugged. "Anyway, it wasn't me, I'm too busy."

Leaving the work area, Foxx stepped aside to let pass an eighteen-wheeler loaded with granite blocks. The driver, a cigarette stuck behind his ear, stopped and leaned out the window. Shania Twain was singing "Black Eyes, Blue Tears" on the cab's radio. "Looking for someone?"

"Investigating Victor Lamott's death. Did you know him?"

"Great guy."

"He was?"

"Actually, he retired a few months after I started working. Only met him once, but his last Christmas here we all got two hundred dollar bonuses. Can't argue with that."

"Do you know of anyone who had a grudge against him?"

"Not around here, buddy. Must have been some kook did it."

It took Foxx two hours to track down Harold "Sparky" Iverson who had owned Lamoille River Granite, a rival firm that had gone bankrupt four years ago. Sparky, in his seventies, white-haired, was coaching a Little League team.

"A sad thing about Victor," said Sparky.

"I hear he could be a sharp businessman."

"What's that?" Sparky pointed to a saucer-sized ear with a copse of white hairs sprouting from it. "Battery went out on my hearing aid and I ain't got around to replacing it yet."

Foxx repeated his remark, and the old graniteman laughed.

"I'll bet someone told you I killed the poor bastard because he ran me out of business." He turned and yelled at a boy standing by the batting cage. "Eddie, hit some flies to Ross, he needs the practice." He turned back to Foxx. "Okay, I went bankrupt but it wasn't Victor that run me out of business. What run me out was economics, contractors using rebar cement instead of granite."

"Another dead end," Foxx told Cheyenne when they met the

next day at his office. It was a warm day, and Miss Martin, wearing shorts and a jaunty straw hat, came over to his desk and toyed with the baseball Nomar Garciaparra had signed. "You look upset," Foxx said.

"I like Porter. His wife too. I mean he's a recovering alcoholic, holds down a full-time job, seems devoted to his wife and kids, and yet his father never cut him any slack."

"What are you getting at, Miss Martin?"

"Can't you call me Cheyenne?"

"No," he almost shouted. "I mean no," he said more gently. "We need to keep this on a business level."

"A business level?"

"I'll be blunt. You're not exactly ugly. In fact—never mind."

"I'm not exactly ugly? Why that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"I should have hired a toothless hag," Foxx said, then brightened. "I've got an idea. Why don't you blacken a few teeth and wear a fright wig, go around in baggy cargo pants. That'll help us maintain a professional distance."

Shaking her head, Miss Martin picked up the baseball from its stand. "The manager at Aubuchon's said Porter was working in the stockroom downstairs most of Monday morning, didn't see him till after ten. So he could have done it. But would he have done it just because his father called him a drunk in front of his kids? That doesn't make sense."

"You're forgetting that Victor may have slept with his wife."

"I don't believe it."

"It does seem a bit far fetched, but if it's true, that could be a motive. His beautiful wife, whom he obviously adores, sleeping with his father whom he hates?"

"What about the other son, John, shouldn't we interview him? Doesn't his land abut his parents?"

"I was thinking the same thing, Holmes. Tabitha said he's a recluse who didn't get along with his father much better than Porter did. We can walk to his place, it's only half a mile across my neighbor's fields and through a beautiful mixed forest. Or would you rather go the long way and ride?"

"You have to ask? Don't forget your binoculars and Roger Tory Peterson."

"But first a little refreshment. It's a warm day." Foxx went to the refrigerator in the corner and withdrew two Dr. Peppers. To the left of the fridge hung a rack with a Remington 12 gauge. As he handed Miss Martin a soda, her eyes lingered on the shotgun.

"Can I ask a personal question? Have you ever shot anyone with that?"

"Only ducks, and none lately. I prefer to hunt with these." He held up the binoculars.

Walking toward John Lamott's log house in the woods, they heard a chain saw. As they reached the clearing in which the house stood, a three-legged dog crawled out from under the porch and growled.

"I hope John's not the perp," said Miss Martin, "because that dog scares me. I'd hate to have a shootout here."

"I love it!" Foxx said. "A shootout? Listen, this isn't 1876 in Tombstone, Arizona, this is 2001 in civilized Vermont." He looked at her, dappled leaf shadow playing across her face. "You don't want anyone to be the perp, do you?"

"I'm a softie."

A leaf shadow darkened her eyes, then lifted, and in her expression he saw a steely resolve. "No, I don't think so," he said.

Through a window they could see inside to the main room, which had a fieldstone fireplace, stuffed deer and bear heads on the walls, and a gun rack with three rifles. Near the house was a woodshed and next to it a rusting blue pick-up that leaned to one side like someone with a bad hip. The chain saw fell silent, and a man in jean shorts walked toward them. "Baron," cried the man. "Ease off."

The dog bared its yellow teeth, but stopped growling and lay down next to the house, keeping a watchful eye on the visitors.

"Well look who's here," said Lamott, looking at them through his good eye, the glass one staring off into the woods. "Fallen into any briar patches lately, Foxx?"

Miss Martin stiffened but said nothing.

"The police beat you to it, guys, they've already been here."

"I'm working with them. This is my assistant, Miss Martin. Can I ask where you were Monday morning?"

"Get real, Foxx, I don't have to tell you a damn thing. But since I have nothing to hide, I'll answer your questions. I was here all morning, cutting trees." John Lamott jerked a thumb toward the woods where a wide swath had been cleared revealing Wheeler Hill about half a mile off. "Estranged? Isn't that the word? My father and I were estranged. I haven't been to his place since last November."

"Your land borders his and you haven't been to his house since last fall?"

"After he turned into a tree-hugger he got increasingly nervous about hunting. Last November during deer season I shot a buck near his house and he blew up, said he didn't want to see me on his land any more." Lamott leaned toward the two, his voice quivering with emotion. "No one could come up to my father's standards. He thought he was God. He was God all right, but he was also having an affair with Porter's wife, Narelle. Can you believe that?" Silence in the woods, only the drilling of a distant woodpecker. "I'll tell you something else, and this will probably shock the burrs off your jockey shorts. I'm not sorry he's dead. Lock me up for saying that if you want, but it's true. Whoever shot him should get a medal, not a jail sentence."

The dog had stopped growling and was wagging its tail as Miss Martin scratched its woolly head.

John Lamott looked at her curiously. "I've never seen him wag

his tail for a stranger before. If you'll excuse me, I'll get back to work." Picking up his chain saw, he turned his back on them and walked toward the slash in the woods.

Foxx swept his eyes a last time around the clearing. A strange place, junk everywhere, the hulk of a defunct car at the edge of the woods and next to it a doorless refrigerator. And the old blue truck tilting to one side.

"Have I been drinking?" Miss Martin whispered. "Because I think that truck is on level ground."

"Must have been those Dr. Peppers we had back at the office."

Foxx had taken his Jumbo Burger onto the patio of the Park Cafe, which was situated on the edge of City Park with a view of the duck pond and a statue of the Civil War hero General George Stannard. He was halfway through his meal when a creature took the seat next to him and made him drop his burger.

It looked like a woman but he couldn't be sure: humped back, a clown's wiry orange hair, teeth that would make a dentist howl with despair. She wore a shapeless wool dress and wool sweater.

"Jeezum Crow!" Foxx said. "I mean goddamn." He reassembled his burger.

The creature was staring at his plate. "Excuse me, sir, but are you going to eat that pickle?"

"Madam, you'd better believe I'm going to eat that pickle."

Giggles spurted from the rot-

ted teeth toward which a surprisingly wrinkle-free hand rose. Erupting into gales of laughter, she said, "I was wondering, can you"—splutter—"spare a dime?"

"I can't spare a dime, but I can spare a sound spanking. You scared the daylights out of me, Miss Martin."

Cheyenne Martin dried her tears with a ragged sleeve. "I'm sorry, but you told me to blacken my teeth and wear a fright wig. It wasn't very funny, was it?" She looked ready to cry.

This mischievous imp. This crazy, bighearted young lady who loved birds and puzzles and was his assistant—but only for a summer. Maybe she'd stay on longer. The thought cheered him so much that he said, "Can I get you something?"

"Do they have iced tea?"

Sipping her tea, Miss Martin said, "I don't know if I can take this job."

"I'll raise your pay."

"You're paying me too much already. I can't take this job because it's too interesting and too emotionally involving. But I'm only kidding, of course, I love the puzzles and emotions."

"Doesn't look good for Porter, does it?" said Foxx. "That piece of crushed granite on Victor's rug? The only crushed granite I've seen lately was in front of his wife's writing shack, yet Porter says he hasn't been to his father's in over a year. I talked to Chief Johnson this morning, he said the coroner has turned in his report. Victor probably died between

nine and ten Monday morning, and in any case not before nine. Porter could have slipped out of the stockroom at Aubuchon's, shot Victor, and hurried back, all within an hour."

Miss Martin brought her glass down so hard on the wicker table the slice of lemon jumped off the rim. "It can't be Porter."

"Isn't that interesting? Porter Lamott's a boozehound with baggy eyes and a cough like a car with fouled plugs, and yet two beauti—I mean two intelligent women, you and his wife Narelle, admire the pants off him."

Down came the drink again. "He's not an alcoholic. He's stopped drinking and I can't tell you—" her voice wavered, almost broke—"how much I admire that. And even though he's sick, he still works full time to support his family, and he encourages Narelle in her writing."

Foxx raised a placating hand. "I admire the guy too. Okay, who did it then?"

"I don't know. But maybe we need to pay a visit to Joan Lamott's gift shop, The Yankee Pedlar, try to find out if she was really there Monday morning."

Foxx grinned. "I wasn't kidding when I said I should be working for you instead of the other way around."

A high school student with green spiked hair and an eyebrow ring was running The Yankee Pedlar. A sign on the door indicated the hours during the week were from nine to five. Foxx and

his assistant looked at the salad bowls and weavings, the blown glass and Vermont pottery. The store was well stocked, and the furnishings—a butternut parson's bench, walnut tea table, Shaker chairs—did not look cheap. A Mr. Coffee burbled on the table beside a plate of petits fours.

Miss Martin asked if Mrs. Lamott was there and the clerk said she wouldn't be in that morning. "I see," said Miss Martin. "Were you here last Monday when her husband died?"

"I don't come in Mondays. Mrs. Lamott's here then until two, then Julie takes over."

The two looked around the store a little more, got a cool too-cheap-to-buy-anything? glance from the clerk as they headed for the door. On the way out, Foxx scooped up a couple petits fours.

Outside he said, "I guess that puts Joan in the clear, since the coroner says Victor probably died between nine and ten."

"I'm starved," said Miss Martin, finishing one of his petits fours and looking at the About Thyme Cafe sign next door.

"That's bean sprouts and arugula."

"It won't kill you to eat a healthy meal now and then," she said, steering him toward the restaurant.

A skinny woman in a tight-fitting black jumpsuit was cutting up eggplant in the open kitchen. She looked angry about something. On top of a commercial refrigerator a marmalade cat was

stretched out, its tail swishing languidly, endlessly dusting the same spot. The only customer was a man with a gray beard, his corner chair tipped back against the wall, reading the *Elizabethville Gazette*.

When the cook brought over their salads and veggie burgers, Foxx said, "Nice place."

"Actually, it sucks," said the cook.

The paper-reader guffawed.

The cook elaborated. "It would be a great place if we had decent neighbors."

Miss Martin said in a low voice, "That was a terrible tragedy Monday."

The cook's narrow face softened. "Victor was a sweet man, did so much for the town. Had that place in City Park set aside for skateboarders. My son worshipped him."

"The widow must be inconsolable," Miss Martin said.

"Not quite." It was so quiet the only sound was the silklike swish of the cat's tail. The cook slipped into a vacant chair at their table. "I think she was seeing someone on the side. All right, maybe he wasn't an angel himself, but since his accident he'd been a changed man."

Miss Martin's face was flushed with excitement. "Can you tell us who the other man is?"

"Whoa, I'm not a tattletale. Besides, I don't know who he is. I've just seen this dude hanging around her shop."

Miss Martin took a deep breath and asked casually, "Was Mrs.

Lamott in her store Monday morning?"

"You're asking a lot of questions."

"I guess I'm just nosy." She chewed her veggie burger. "Good isn't it, Mr. Foxx?"

"Yeah."

The cook was looking at Foxx. "Wasn't there a photo of you in the *Gazette* a couple months ago? Broke your arm chasing that wife-beater?" She patted him on the hand. "You didn't catch him, but I appreciate the effort. I've been there myself. Back to Joan Lamott. When was her husband shot?"

"Between nine and ten," Cheyenne said.

"She wasn't there at nine, I can tell you that much. She didn't open till nine thirty or even later. Maybe she slept late. That's all I can tell you, and now I have to get back to work and make some more of that bean sprout salad you're not eating, Mr. Foxx." She started to rise.

"Mrs. Lamott is not one of your favorite people, is she?" Miss Martin asked.

Half out of her chair, the cook's face darkened. "She's trying to drive me out so she can have this space. Keeps calling the police and saying, 'I smell marijuana from next door, I think there's a wild orgy going on at the About Thyme Cafe.' That woman is poison."

"Do you think she's capable of killing her husband?" Miss Martin asked. The newspaper at the corner table stopped rustling.

The cook stood. "Can I get you

something else? We have a nice kiwi and banana compote for dessert?"

Back on the sidewalk, Miss Martin shook her fist. "It's gotta be Joan or her lover."

"Easy does it. The cook's watching us. My father always said, strike while the iron is hot, so let's go back to the widow's house, hit her with some hard questions. She might kick us out, but on the other hand, she might crumble and start talking. I've seen it happen before."

On the way to Joan's they hit a pothole and the car rattled and shook like a hula dancer. "Hope I didn't lose another part," Foxx said.

Miss Martin laughed engagingly. "I still can't call you Burton?"

Foxx almost ended up in the ditch but swerved in time. "This isn't working."

"What isn't?"

"I'll be blunt."

"I should stick to wildlife management?"

"No, you got stuff out of the owner of About Thyme that I couldn't have, and out of John Lamott. Even his dog liked you. As a matter of fact, you'd make a great cop or P.I., but I'm talking about my business. I have to make a living. If I fall for you—" here he laughed silently and despairingly at that "if," "we'd be less effective as a team. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Foxx." Half to herself, she added, "Maybe I should stand

at attention and salute every time I address you."

"There's a slight discrepancy in your story," Foxx said.

They were in the living room sitting on a sofa. The widow sat in a beige armchair. The green chair Victor had been sitting in when he was shot was gone, as was the cherry coffee table, replaced by a thick slab of glass. The bullet hole was still in the window. Someone was walking around upstairs. Marion De Shields with her over-size diamond? Foxx wondered.

"We've learned you weren't at The Yankee Pedlar Monday at nine," he said, "which is when you said you were."

He found it disconcerting to hear a well dressed, sophisticated lady splutter like a drunk in a seedy bar. "This is outrageous," hissed Mrs. Lamott. "You have no right to ask me questions anyway unless my lawyer is present."

"Why not tell the truth, darling?"

Both Foxx and his assistant spun around on the sofa and saw a man in a silk shirt and check trousers standing in the entrance from the hallway. With his long yellow hair and dark-circled eyes, there was an elegant yet dissolute quality about him. Foxx was sure he had seen him before somewhere. Out of the side of her mouth, Miss Martin whispered, "It's *him*!"

"Trevor," gasped Mrs. Lamott.

The stranger spread wide his arms, a pained smile on his face that reminded Foxx of a wax statue placed too close to a flame. "I

can't go on like this. I must proclaim my love in public." He turned to Burton. "I am, in case you don't know, Trevor Squires. Joan was with me when it happened. Don't worry, we weren't doing anything scandalous. As a matter of fact, we were eating scrambled eggs with rosemary and Canadian bacon."

"Now I remember where I've seen you," Foxx said. "Weren't you one of the generals in *Henry IV* last fall with the Dutton Falls Players?"

"I also played Hamlet the year before."

"I'm afraid I missed that."

"Mr. Squires," said Cheyenne, "can you tell us where you were eating those scrambled eggs and rosemary?"

Squires ignored her and went to Joan's side.

Foxx rose from the couch. "Miss Martin asked you a question."

"I don't believe I know a Miss Martin. Oh, is that you? And what is your role in this farce?"

"Sir," said Foxx, his lips quivering, "you may be a successful actor but as a gentleman you leave something to be desired."

The man whirled on him. "Look who's talking. *Brer Foxx*, the laughing stock of the town. Fell out a window while in hot pursuit and broke your arm?"

"You . . . you *retard*," Miss Martin said, rising from her seat.

"No, please." Squires tipped his head back and laughed till tears came. "This is bad for my blood pressure."

Oddly, Foxx felt calm. Getting

to his feet, he smiled levelly at Squires and said to the widow, "Mrs. Lamott, thank you for your time." He moved toward the door, Cheyenne following.

"What a buffoon," Squires murmured.

Pausing at the door, Miss Martin asked pleasantly, "You played Hamlet, sir?"

Squires extended one leg and swept back an arm. "Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?"

"I'll have to go see a production by the Dutton Falls Players," Miss Martin said. "Their makeup artist must be a genius to make you look like a handsome young prince."

While the actor hurled epithets, the two went outside. "What a pompous ass," Miss Martin said. "I'll bet anything he's the killer." She put a hand on his arm. "I was touched when you—oh look, a hummingbird just went into that spruce. She probably has a nest there."

"She?"

"Only the males have the ruby throats," she called over her shoulder, stepping around to the other side of the spruce. Foxx walked on to the car and sat brooding behind the wheel.

"Hi," he said a few minutes later when she returned, as if she had been gone a long time. "What's wrong?"

Miss Martin held out her hand. Foxx was confused, because there was nothing in it, and then he saw the long red hair. "Where'd you get that?"

"From that hummer's nest. They often use human hair. Narelle said she hasn't been here since last summer?"

Foxx didn't see his assistant for three days. She was busy with schoolwork, and he had to fly to Chicago to check a report concerning a Burlington woman's missing husband. One fine May morning after breakfast, Mr. Wellmeyer, a former bank president, had walked out of the house and never returned. The report that he was in Chicago led nowhere, and Foxx was beginning to think Mr. Wellmeyer was either in Paris, Mexico, or dead.

Returning to Elizabethtown, he called Chief Johnson, told him what progress he'd made on the Lamott case, and learned that the Elizabethtown P.D. had not gotten very far either. "Something will turn up," said Johnson. "Sooner or later somebody will call in with a hot tip."

When Foxx told him about Miss Martin finding a red hair in a hummingbird's nest at the victim's house, Johnson had a good chuckle. "Your new assistant sounds great over the phone, but she isn't a little . . . you know?"

"No," said Foxx, stung.

"Listen, what do I know. That could be the break we need."

When Foxx mentioned meeting Marion De Shields at the widow's, there was a low growl on the other end of the line. "The old prune. I nailed her for speeding last summer, and she acted like she'd been strip-searched on the village

green. Let me know what happens with Narelle Lamott."

Later that same day, Miss Martin called and asked if there were any phone calls he wanted made or paperwork caught up on. There wasn't any really, but he told her to come in anyway.

He decided that since she seemed to have taken a strong liking to both Porter and Narelle, it might be better if he visited Narelle alone. He found the lanky redhead in a deck chair outside her writing shack, a clipboard on her drawn-up knees. No one else was around. At the chair's foot sat a basket with weeds and a forked weeding tool. A few feet away a short walkway of crushed granite led to the shack's door.

She looked up, eyes glazed. "An idea came to me while weeding and if you wait, *poof!* it's gone. Just a sec." She wrote furiously for another two minutes and put down her pencil. "There, I feel better. Have you found the perp yet—isn't that the term you use? Frankly, if I were a cold-blooded killer I'd be offended if someone called me a perp. Sounds awfully nerdy."

"You said you hadn't been to Victor's since last summer?"

"Yes."

"I have something you left at his place." Foxx took a pillbox from his pocket and extracted a long red hair.

Narelle laughed. "Mr. Foxx, you are a character. What is this all about?"

"We found this in a hummingbird's nest by Victor's house."

Narelle drew a hand across her

brow, then held out her arm and pinched it. "Am I dreaming? Are you suggesting that a red hair found at Victor's proves I killed him?"

"We also found a bit of crushed granite on the living room rug—probably from that path there."

The writer stared at him.

"An old love gone awry? You were afraid he was going to disclose what had happened between you?"

"This is no longer amusing. That hair belongs to someone else."

"We'll have it examined in the lab. The crushed granite too. There are techniques so sophisticated today—"

Narelle's face had turned the same hue as her hair. "Can't you leave well enough alone?" Snatching the weeding tool from the basket, she jumped up. The weeder came toward him, its forked point glinting in the sun. There was a rip, a grazing pain. He grabbed her wrist and bent it. With a cry, she dropped the tool and sank onto the deck chair.

Foxx glanced at his torn shirt, the blood oozing from the wound. He was sure that at the last minute she had thrust the tool away from him. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Lamott. You can scoff at this, but I wanted it to be someone else."

She looked up with a tear-stained face. "Three years ago Porter was drinking heavily. He'd been fired from his job at a building supply yard. I was at the end of my rope. Then Victor had his accident and . . . I guess I felt sorry

for him. In a weak, stupid stupid, moment I slept with him. Our thing only lasted a couple weeks and then I came to my senses and broke it off. But he kept pestering me, threatening to tell Porter if I didn't come through. I couldn't take it anymore. I went over to see him, to plead with him to leave me alone. I had no intention of hurting him. He listened with a condescending smile, then started cooing like a pigeon: 'Narelle, why are you so upset? We were meant for each other, my little pigeon.' That was his pet name for me; I couldn't stand it. He reached for me with that greasy smile of his and I broke away and ran outside to my car. By the time I got home I had made up my mind. I went into the cellar, got a rifle, and returned. And that was that."

"I'll have to call the police."

"You can't just forget it? Say some kook did it? He was a nasty man."

"I wish I could." He picked up her clipboard from the lawn and handed it to her. "Life is often unfair. I'm sorry, that was a horrible cliché, wasn't it?"

She looked at him a long time without a word.

He found Cheyenne in his office when he got home. She looked at his torn shirt and bleeding side and went white.

"I'm taking you to the hospital."

"I'm fine, it's just a scratch."

"You're not fine and I'm putting a bandage on it."

"Come on." Foxx waved her away.

"You know something, Mr. Foxx? You're a wannabe Rambo who's going to get himself killed one of these days. You have a choice: You can tell me where the medicine cabinet is, or you can start looking for a new assistant."

"I don't have a medicine cabinet."

"That's right, they're for sissies, aren't they? Pull your shirt up, at least I can wash it out." She pushed him toward the bathroom just beyond the office, soaked a washcloth in warm water. Foxx winced, but it wasn't entirely unpleasant. Smelling her fresh hair, feeling the light touch of her fingers on his side, he almost wished his wound were more serious.

"What happened?" she asked when they were back in the office and she was satisfied he would live.

"Narelle confessed—after going for me with a weeding tool. But I don't think she meant to seriously hurt me because at the last minute her arm swerved."

"Anyone but her."

"I told her the same thing."

"Let me guess why: Victor threatened to tell Porter about their affair?"

"It wasn't much of an affair. She says it only lasted a couple weeks. This is funny. We've solved the murder of Victor Lamott, and yet we're both upset. Depressed even. I almost wish I'd kept my mouth shut and not had Narelle arrested. I know Victor gave that land to City Park, but the more I learn about him the less I like him."

"I feel the same way," said Miss

Martin. "Narelle may be a bit whacko, but she seems like a good mother, and in spite of her lapse, a devoted wife." She stared out the window at a redwing blackbird balanced on a cattail. "We could take a walk, maybe that'll cheer us up. Hear a hermit thrush?"

"It might help," said Foxx, picking up his binoculars and bird book.

As they stepped outside, Cheyenne asked, "She came at you with one of those sharp-pointed dojobs?"

"But like I said, at the last minute she drew her hand back. Otherwise I would have been skewered. In spite of what she did to Victor, I don't think she's a bad person. In fact, I kinda like her."

"You're in the wrong business, Mr. Foxx. You should've been a preacher."

"I broke a guy's arm once in a bar."

"I don't believe it."

"He was badmouthing the Red Sox, said they always folded when the chips were down. He even started running down Nomar and that's when I lost it."

They crossed the neighbor's field and entered the mixed forest, walked until they could see John Lamott's house through the trees, and then veered to the right onto an old logging road.

"This road connects John's place with his father's," said Foxx. They walked along, stopping once to watch an ovenbird forage among last fall's leaves, but heard no hermit thrushes.

"Better duck," said Foxx. They had come to a tree that had broken off ten feet up, its upper part leaning across the road.

"Strange place for a blaze." Miss Martin was looking at a blue scrape mark on the trunk. "Why would a forester want a healthy tree like that cut down?" They walked another ten yards. "My gosh, we've gone farther than I thought. There's Victor's place." Through a gap in the trees, they saw the mansion, its picture windows glinting in the sun. "Shhh," said Miss Martin. "Hear it?"

They stood wordlessly in the woods listening to the frail yet bell-clear notes of a hermit thrush.

They were both subdued when they got back to the office, thinking about Narelle. Foxx was also worried about his weight, his shot diet, the Red Sox losing four in a row, Nomar being hurt. When the phone rang, he motioned for Miss Martin to pick it up.

She listened. "What? Are you serious?" She put a hand over the phone. "It's Chief Johnson and he doesn't believe Narelle. He thinks she's trying to—What's that, Mr. Johnson? Okay, we'll be right over."

Chief Johnson peered at them from behind a haze of cigar smoke in back of the station. "Damn anti-smoking laws, I feel like a leper. I been smoking all my life and I ain't—" he bent over, coughing raggedly—"about to quit this late in the game." He took a final puff, waved to a woman in a back yard

who was watching him and laughing, and led them into the squad room. He went to a desk buried under six inches of paper-work. A baseball sat in a coffee cup at one corner with Nomar Garciaparra's signature scrawled across it. Johnson took out a file marked LAMOTT, VICTOR and pushed aside papers and a two-way radio.

"Okay," said Johnson, "Narelle Lamott's downstairs in the tank and I don't believe her. I think she's got this martyr complex, wants to be a hero." Miss Martin jerked a thumb toward Foxx and Chief Johnson laughed. "Yeah, like him. I think she's doing this to protect a certain person. Better sit down, folks." A sly grin spread across Johnson's jaw. Dramatically he pulled out the bridge score sheet. "This score thing and a pencil were near Victor Lamott's hand when we found him on the rug, as if he were trying to write something, send us a dying message. Well, I was looking at it this morning and something jumped out at me. A doodle at the bottom." He pointed to a crude sketch in pencil. "Does that suggest someone to you?"

The two bent forward for a closer look, and Foxx whistled. "Looks like a diamond. Marion De Shields?"

"The old prune. Victor Lamott's land bordered hers, probably a boundary dispute."

"But they played bridge together every Thursday night."

"Doesn't mean she liked him. I

play poker with a guy I can't stand."

"Marion De Shields once loaned, or maybe gave, Narelle and Porter money, but is that enough reason to take a murder rap for someone?"

"Does seem a stretch," said Johnson, tugging on an ear. "But who knows, maybe Marion and Narelle are lovers. This is a different world from the one I—"

"Wait a minute." Miss Martin was staring at a photograph of Victor Lamott lying facedown by the overturned coffee table. "Isn't that a card in his left hand?"

They peered, could only see the geometric pattern on the card's back.

"Do you have a photo of Victor on his back by any chance?" asked Miss Martin.

Chief rummaged through the file, spread out another glossy. "No exit wound. The bullet stayed in his head, probably hit his skull."

But Miss Martin wasn't listening. "That card in his hand."

"Jack of hearts?" said Foxx.

"What kind of jack of hearts?"

Foxx shrugged. "How many kinds are there?"

"A one-eyed jack of hearts."

"So?"

"What's another name for John?"

"Jeezum crow," whispered Foxx.

"Not Jeezum crow," said Miss Martin. "Jack. And that's not all. He was a granite carver, which would explain the bits of crushed granite on Victor's rug."

Foxx was on his feet, walking

around the desk. "There's something else too, something that's been gnawing at me and I can't put my finger on. Something odd about John or about his place."

"The three-legged dog?" said Cheyenne.

"Maybe, maybe."

"That swath of trees he cut with a view of Wheeler Hill?"

Foxx stopped pacing. "Good point. But there's something else." He kept walking, Chief Johnson watching with a concerned expression.

Miss Martin laughed. "I know what," she said breezily, "the leaning truck."

Johnson was shaking his head. "Folks, let's get back to earth. We have a job to—what's wrong, Burton?"

Foxx had stopped in his tracks, staring at his assistant but not seeing her. "That's it! He had let the air out of the tires on one side to squeeze under that tree across the road. That blue paint isn't a forester's blaze, it's where that old Chevy scraped against the tree." He turned to Johnson. "That tree is close to Victor's house, where John claims he hasn't been since last November."

Chief drummed his fingers on the desk. "Miss Martin, I hope you stay in police work. In fact, there's an vacancy in my department."

"Now wait a minute," said Foxx, sitting down. He noticed with a sinking heart that his assistant said nothing.

"We still don't have enough for an arrest," said Johnson. "We'd be laughed out of court."

Foxx nodded, staring thoughtfully at the ceiling.

He knew it was insane, tramping through the woods with a pair of binoculars and a thawing steak to look over John Lamott's property, but he had a hunch. Hadn't Tabitha said that John was a pack rat, never threw anything away? If he couldn't drive away from a parking meter with ten minutes still on it, would he throw away a .243 rifle? It might still be in that antlered gunrack in his living room. He came to the edge of the clearing with his baggie, wishing he'd taken the steak out of the freezer compartment sooner. Good, John's car was gone. No sign of the dog.

Foxx crept over to the truck, now level, which meant that John must have blown up the tires. He saw where blue paint had been scraped off the top of the cab. He then trained his glasses on the living room and saw the antlered rack with its three rifles, but from this distance couldn't tell if one was a .243.

A low growl came from inside the woodshed. Damn. Maybe he should have brought Miss Martin with him, she had a way with animals. The last time they were here the snarling mutt had taken one look at her and started wagging its tail.

Burton gave a snort of laughter. The same thing had happened to him the first time he saw her. But he hadn't brought her. This was something he needed to do on his own to prove to the world that he

was Burton Foxx, not a bumbling Brer Foxx who'd fallen out of a window into a rosebush. Baron came hobbling out of the shed on his three legs, saw the intruder, and went into high gear, flopping across the yard, teeth bared. Fumbling with his Baggie, Foxx threw his steak at the dog, which ran past the meat without a glance.

"Steak!" he shouted, but the dog kept coming. "What the hell, you a vegetarian?" He bolted for the nearest tree, binoculars bouncing against his chest, grabbing a branch and managing to hook a leg over it.

He climbed up to a fork in the maple and wedged himself in. Minutes passed during which he murmured, "You fool, you fool." What would that smartass reporter on the *Gazette* do with him now? He imagined the headline: BRER FOXX TREED BY BRER DOG. He tried to divert the dog's attention to the flank steak which lay like a slab of roadkill on the ground but Baron was more interested in the live meat in the tree. A quarter hour passed. Tentatively he lowered a leg, then jerked it up again as the shepherd took a piece out of his cuff. Then a new sound came from the woods, the rattle of a car on the woods road, and a minute later John Lamott's blue Tercel drove into the yard. The engine was shut off and the car sat there. Suddenly the driver's door flew open and Lamott jumped out.

"What the . . . ?"

Foxx waved his binoculars. "Hi, John, how's it going?"

Lamott glared at him.

Foxx chuckled lamely. "I'm afraid your dog doesn't like me. I was out birding when he chased me up this tree."

John was fast; inside the house and out again in less than half a minute with a rifle. He called the dog off. "Get down, Foxx, and don't give me any baloney about birding."

Foxx climbed down, the solid earth feeling good, renewing his courage. The dog had stopped growling, but its hackles were still up. This was it. High noon. You either took a deep breath and seized the moment, or you passed it up and anguished over the lapse the rest of your life. Slowly he walked toward Lamott, who glared at him with his good eye.

"Stop right there!"

Foxx kept coming, hand out for the rifle. His knees were doing fine but his heart was racing like a weasel in a cage.

"Fat boy, are you crazy?" The granite carver cocked his gun. "One more step . . ."

Foxx smiled and kept coming, his knees beginning to feel wobbly.

An unhinged grin spread across Lamott's face. "Good-bye, fool. You're going to get the same thing I gave my father."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." It was a lady's voice and it was coming from the woods.

A moment so quiet the dog's panting was audible. "You're bluff-

ing," said Lamott, starting to swing his rifle. Turning, Foxx saw something he never expected to see: Miss Martin at the edge of the woods holding his Remington 12 gauge. But what really got him was the small but deadly smile on her lips, a smile as hard as granite.

John Lamott must have noticed that smile too because there was a clatter as the rifle fell to the ground. He glanced around at the front steps behind him. "Can I sit down?"

She nodded, and he walked unsteadily to the steps and lowered himself. He raised his good eye to the swath of cleared land with its view of Wheeler Hill. "Good-bye, baby," he whispered. For a full half minute he stared at the hill while Baron finished the steak and came over and leaned against his master's knee. John turned a despairing face to the two standing near him. "What difference does it make now, my dream is shot. You probably heard that I started a restaurant once. It went under. That does something to you. But it was a lousy location, in downtown Burlington with two other restaurants on the same block. I wanted Wheeler. Can you imagine what an inn up there would be like? They'd be coming from New York, New Hampshire, Maine, Canada, all around. I knew the old man had planned to leave me Wheeler, but I was afraid after his conversion he might have changed his mind, so I decided to see him, to try and bury the hatchet. I told him about my plans for Wheeler, and he said

my dream was 'disgusting.' "The forlorn face winced at the memory. "Disgusting? And then he grinned and said, 'I've got news for you, son, something I haven't told anyone yet, not even your mother. I'm giving the development rights to Wheeler to the Land Trust.' And he laughed. I hadn't planned to kill him. I just wanted to talk to him, share my excitement with him. I even stupidly thought he might congratulate me."

Baron lay down beside his master. A hand went out, patted the brown head.

"Something snapped then. If he hadn't called my dream 'disgusting' and laughed in my face . . . I went back to my truck, got my .243, and the rest is history. The saddest history ever told." John Lamott laughed hollowly.

After Chief Johnson and a sergeant from the Elizabethtown P.D. had arrived and escorted Lamott to the station, Foxx turned to his assistant. "How'd you know I was here?"

"Easy. Your car was gone and so were your binoculars. But I knew you hadn't gone birding because Roger Tory Peterson was still on the shelf."

"I think he was going to shoot me."

Her jaw muscles worked and she turned away. "You're a macho fool, you know that, Mr. Foxx? Some day you won't be so lucky."

Foxx was coming out of Kinney Drugs with some Tums when he

ran into Narelle Lamott. She took him aside.

"Do you think I'm a nut case?"

"Not at all. Just a dreamer. And a fabricator. Your confession was a lie."

Narelle bit her lip, looked around. "Can we sit in the park a minute? It's cold for June, isn't it, but this is Vermont where anything can happen with the weather." She pulled up her collar as they crossed the street and sat on a bench under General Stannard. "I confessed because I was afraid my husband had done it. He could do something like that and never tell me about it. He knew about my little fling with Victor and though he never said anything, I think it gnawed at him. Also, Victor was unbelievably mean to him, calling him a ne'er-do-well and a drunk. Porter hasn't had a drink in two years, but you couldn't tell his father that. Porter goes to work every morning with his wheezing lungs and rotten liver to support us, while I . . ." She burst into sobs. "I bring in nothing."

"What about the red hair we found?"

"I really did go to see him. Told him if he called me any more I was going to report it to the police. He laughed, of course, but I think he knew I meant it." Shivering, she pulled her collar up higher.

Foxx patted her hand. "Keep writing. You'll make it someday."

"You liar. Now we're even."

"I'm not lying, Narelle."

He watched her walk away. He

then went into the Park Cafe and took his favorite seat in the corner of the patio with a view of General Stannard and the duck pond. He passed over the Jumbo Burger and ordered a green salad, tuna fish sandwich on whole wheat, and a Dr. Pepper. He was finishing his lunch when he saw a couple holding hands and reading the inscription on the statue's plaque; he recognized the jaunty straw hat on the woman. Looking at the man's back, he felt a heart-sick pang and hoped he was ugly and stupid looking.

The couple finished with the plaque and turned to walk off, and Foxx saw that the man was handsome, with an alert, friendly face. As he watched, curiously the pain dissolved and was replaced with a softer feeling. Miss Martin looked so relaxed, so glad to be where she was, and he was happy for her. He raised his Dr. Pepper, ice tinkling, and offered a silent toast to the two lovers.

"You're lucky you haven't gone off the road and hit a tree," said Skip Purdue. "The ball joints are shot, the tie rod looks like a pretzel. Not to mention the shocks." The mechanic patted the hood of the Caprice. He and Foxx stood on the greasy, packed gravel outside Skip's garage. "I should have it ready tomorrow afternoon."

"You got a loaner?"

Skip scratched his head. "I've only got one and it's out." He looked toward his house where a balloon-tired bicycle leaned against the front porch.

"Forget that," said Foxx, "I'll walk before I use a bike."

Two miles on back roads on a bicycle wasn't his idea of fun, but it could have been worse on this late June evening with a breeze in the maples, birds singing, and farmers bringing in their cows. It even occurred to him that he might have to do it more often. He turned off Quarry Road, coasted down the De Shields's long gravel drive, leaned his bicycle against the statue of a Greek discus thrower, and limped up the steps—the ride was bumpier than he had thought—wondering what Etta Beaglehole would be like. With a name like that she was probably ninety years old and used a walker.

But he was wrong. Ms. Beaglehole was a dark-haired woman in

her late thirties, maybe early forties, with twinkling eyes and an easy laugh. After the introductions and some polite chitchat, Foxx eased over to a window overlooking Wheeler Hill and thumped the end table with his fist.

Marion De Shields came over, her diamond ring sparkling like Halley's comet. "Is something wrong?"

"I thumped that table because of life's infinite possibilities. It's never dull, is it?" He tilted his head toward the De Shields's diamond. "Like that stone."

"But there's an important difference between life and this diamond." A smile inched across Marion's face. "Life is real."

He stared at her.

"Come," she said putting a hand on his sleeve, "let's play some bridge."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE PLEA

Susan Glaspell



Illustration by Linda Weatherly

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Senator Harrison concluded his argument and sat down. There was no applause, but he had expected none. Senator Dorman was already saying "Mr. President?" and there was a stir in the crowded galleries, and an anticipatory moving of chairs among the Senators. In the press gallery the reporters bunched together their scattered papers and inspected their pencil-points with earnestness. Dorman was the best speaker of the Senate, and he was on the popular side of it. It would be the great speech of the session, and the prospect was cheering after a deluge of railroad and insurance bills.

"I want to tell you," he began, "why I have worked for this resolution recommending the pardon of Alfred Williams. It is one of the great laws of the universe that every living thing be given a chance. In the case before us that law has been violated. This does not resolve itself into a question of second chances. The boy of whom we are speaking has never had his first."

Senator Harrison swung his chair halfway around and looked out at the green things which were again coming into their own on the State-house grounds. He knew—in substance—what Senator Dorman would say without hearing it, and he was a little tired of the whole affair. He hoped that one way or other they would finish it up that night, and go ahead with something else. He had done what he could, and now the responsibility was with the rest of them. He thought they were shouldering a great deal to advocate the pardon in the face of the united opposition of Johnson County, where the crime had been committed. It seemed a community should be the best judge of its own crimes, and that was what he, as the Senator from Johnson, had tried to impress upon them.

He knew that his argument against the boy had been a strong one. He rather liked the attitude in which he stood. It seemed as if he were the incarnation of outraged justice attempting to hold its own at the floodgates of emotion. He liked to think he was looking far beyond the present and the specific and acting as guardian of the future—and the whole. In summing it up that night the reporters would tell in highly wrought fashion of the moving appeal made by Senator Dorman, and then they would speak dispassionately of the logical argument of the leader of the opposition. There was more satisfaction to self in logic than in mere eloquence. He was even a little proud of his unpopularity. It seemed sacrificial.

He wondered why it was Senator Dorman had thrown himself into it so whole-heartedly. All during the session the Senator from Maxwell had neglected personal interests in behalf of this boy, who was nothing to him in the world. He supposed it was as a sociological and psy-

From Lifted Masks, published in 1912.

chological experiment. Senator Dorman had promised the Governor to assume guardianship of the boy if he were let out. The Senator from Johnson inferred that as a student of social science his eloquent colleague wanted to see what he could make of him. To suppose the interest merely personal and sympathetic would seem discreditable.

"I need not dwell upon the story," the Senator from Maxwell was saying, "for you all are familiar with it already. It is said to have been the most awful crime ever committed in the State. I grant you that it was, and then I ask you to look for a minute into the conditions leading up to it.

"When the boy was born, his mother was instituting divorce proceedings against his father. She obtained the divorce, and remarried when Alfred was three months old. From the time he was a mere baby she taught him to hate his father. Everything that went wrong with him she told him was his father's fault. His first vivid impression was that his father was responsible for all the wrong of the universe.

"For seven years that went on, and then his mother died. His stepfather did not want him. He was going to Missouri, and the boy would be a useless expense and a bother. He made no attempt to find a home for him; he did not even explain—he merely went away and left him. At the age of seven the boy was turned out on the world, after having been taught one thing—to hate his father. He stayed a few days in the barren house, and then new tenants came and closed the doors against him. It may have occurred to him as a little strange that he had been sent into a world where there was no place for him.

"When he asked the neighbors for shelter, they told him to go to his own father and not bother strangers. He said he did not know where his father was. They told him, and he started to walk—a distance of fifty miles. I ask you to bear in mind, gentlemen, that he was only seven years of age. It is the age when the average boy is beginning the third reader, and when he is shooting marbles and spinning tops.

"When he reached his father's house he was told at once that he was not wanted there. The man had remarried, there were other children, and he had no place for Alfred. He turned him away; but the neighbors protested, and he was compelled to take him back. For four years he lived in this home, to which he had come unbidden, and where he was never made welcome.

"The whole family rebelled against him. The father satisfied his resentment against the boy's dead mother by beating her son, by encouraging his wife to abuse him, and inspiring the other children to despise him. It seems impossible such conditions should exist. The only proof of their possibility lies in the fact of their existence.

"I need not go into the details of the crime. He had been beaten by his father that evening after a quarrel with his stepmother about spilling the milk. He went, as usual, to his bed in the barn; but the hay was suffocating, his head ached, and he could not sleep. He arose in the middle of the night, went to the house, and killed both his father and stepmother.

"I shall not pretend to say what thoughts surged through the boy's brain as he lay there in the stifling hay with the hot blood pounding against his temples. I shall not pretend to say whether he was sane or insane as he walked to the house for the perpetration of the awful crime. I do not even affirm it would not have happened had there been some human being there to lay a cooling hand on his hot forehead, and say a few soothing, loving words to take the sting from the loneliness, and ease the suffering. I ask you to consider only one thing: he was eleven years old at the time, and he had no friend in all the world. He knew nothing of sympathy; he knew only injustice."

Senator Harrison was still looking out at the budding things on the State-house grounds, but in a vague way he was following the story. He knew when the Senator from Maxwell completed the recital of facts and entered upon his plea. He was conscious that it was stronger than he had anticipated—more logic and less empty exhortation. He was telling of the boy's life in reformatory and penitentiary since the commission of the crime, of how he had expanded under kindness, of his mental attainments, the letters he could write, the books he had read, the hopes he cherished. In the twelve years he had spent there he had been known to do no unkind nor mean thing; he responded to affection—craved it. It was not the record of a degenerate, the Senator from Maxwell was saying.

A great many things were passing through the mind of the Senator from Johnson. He was trying to think who it was that wrote that book, *Put Yourself in His Place*. He had read it once, and it bothered him to forget names. Then he was wondering why it was the philosophers had not more to say about the incongruity of people who had never had any trouble of their own sitting in judgment upon people who had known nothing but trouble. He was thinking also that abstract rules did not always fit smoothly over concrete cases, and that it was hard to make life a matter of rules, anyway.

Next he was wondering how it would have been with the boy Alfred Williams if he had been born in Charles Harrison's place; and then he was working it out the other way and wondering how it would have been with Charles Harrison had he been born in Alfred Williams's place. He wondered whether the idea of murder would have grown in Alfred Williams's heart had he been born to the things to which Charles Harrison was born, and whether it would

have come within the range of possibility for Charles Harrison to murder his father if he had been born to Alfred Williams's lot. Putting it that way, it was hard to estimate how much of it was the boy himself, and how much the place the world had prepared for him. And if it was the place prepared for him more than the boy, why was the fault not more with the preparers of the place than with the occupant of it? The whole thing was very confusing.

"This page," the Senator from Maxwell was saying, lifting the little fellow to the desk, "is just eleven years of age, and he is within three pounds of Alfred Williams's weight when he committed the murder. I ask you, gentlemen, if this little fellow should be guilty of a like crime tonight, to what extent would you, in reading of it in the morning, charge him with the moral discernment which is the first condition of moral responsibility? If Alfred Williams's story were this boy's story, would you deplore that there had been no one to check the childish passion, or would you say it was the inborn instinct of the murderer? And suppose again this were Alfred Williams at the age of eleven, would you not be willing to look into the future and say if he spent twelve years in penitentiary and reformatory, in which time he developed the qualities of useful and honorable citizenship, that the ends of justice would then have been met, and the time at hand for the world to begin the payment of her debt?"

Senator Harrison's eyes were fixed upon the page standing on the opposite desk. Eleven was a younger age than he had supposed. As he looked back upon it and recalled himself when eleven years of age—his irresponsibility, his dependence—he was unwilling to say what would have happened if the world had turned upon him as it had upon Alfred Williams. At eleven his greatest grievance was that the boys at school called him "yellow-top." He remembered throwing a rock at one of them for doing it. He wondered if it was criminal instinct prompted the throwing of the rock. He wondered how high the percentage of children's crimes would go were it not for countermanding influences. It seemed the great difference between Alfred Williams and a number of other children of eleven had been the absence of the countermanding influence.

There came to him of a sudden a new and moving thought. Alfred Williams had been cheated of his boyhood. The chances were he had never gone swimming, nor to a ball game, or maybe never to a circus. It might even be that he had never owned a dog. The Senator from Maxwell was right when he said the boy had never been given his chance, had been defrauded of that which has been a boy's heritage since the world itself was young.

And the later years—how were they making it up to him? He recalled what to him was the most awful thing he had ever heard about

the State penitentiary: they never saw the sun rise down there, and they never saw it set. They saw it at its meridian, when it climbed above the stockade, but as it rose into the day, and as it sank into the night, it was denied them. And there, at the penitentiary, they could not even look up at the stars. It had been years since Alfred Williams raised his face to God's heaven and knew he was part of it all. The voices of the night could not penetrate the little cell in the heart of the mammoth stone building where he spent his evenings over those masterpieces with which, they said, he was more familiar than the average member of the Senate. When he read those things Victor Hugo said of the vastness of the night, he could only look around at the walls that enclosed him and try to reach back over the twelve years for some satisfying conception of what night really was.

The Senator from Johnson shuddered: they had taken from a living creature the things of life, and all because in the crucial hour there had been no one to say a staying word. Man had cheated him of the things that were man's, and then shut him away from the world that was God's. They had made for him a life barren of compensations.

There swept over the Senator a great feeling of self-pity. As representative of Johnson County, it was he who must deny this boy the whole great world without, the people who wanted to help him, and what the Senator from Maxwell called "his chance." If Johnson County carried the day, there would be something unpleasant for him to consider all the remainder of his life. As he grew to be an older man he would think of it more and more—what the boy would have done for himself in the world if the Senator from Johnson had not been more logical and more powerful than the Senator from Maxwell.

Senator Dorman was nearing the end of his argument. "In spite of the undying prejudice of the people of Johnson County," he was saying, "I can stand before you today and say that after an unsparing investigation of this case I do not believe I am asking you to do anything in violation of justice when I beg of you to give this boy his chance."

It was going to a vote at once, and the Senator from Johnson County looked out at the budding things and wondered whether the boy down at the penitentiary knew the Senate was considering his case that afternoon. It was without vanity he wondered whether what he had been trained to think of as an all-wise providence would not have preferred that Johnson County be represented that session by a less able man.

A great hush fell over the Chamber, for ayes and noes followed almost in alternation. After a long minute of waiting the secretary called, in a tense voice:

"Ayes, 30; Noes, 32."

The Senator from Johnson had proven too faithful a servant of his constituents. The boy in the penitentiary was denied his chance.

The usual things happened: some women in the galleries who had boys at home cried aloud; the reporters were fighting for occupancy of the telephone booths, and most of the Senators began the perusal of the previous day's Journal with elaborate interest. Senator Dorman indulged in none of these feints. A full look at his face just then told how much of his soul had gone into the fight for the boy's chance, and the look about his eyes was a little hard on the theory of psychological experiment.

Senator Harrison was looking out at the budding trees, but his face too had grown strange, and he seemed to be looking miles beyond and years ahead. It seemed that he himself was surrendering the voices of the night, and the comings and goings of the sun. He would never look at them—feel them—again without remembering he was keeping one of his fellow creatures away from them. He wondered at his own presumption in denying any living thing participation in the universe. And all the while there were before him visions of the boy who sat in the cramped cell with the volume of a favorite poet before him, trying to think how it would seem to be out under the stars.

The stillness in the Senate-Chamber was breaking; they were going ahead with something else. It seemed to the Senator from Johnson that sun, moon, and stars were wailing out protest for the boy who wanted to know them better. And yet it was not sun, moon, and stars so much as the unattended ball game, the never-seen circus, and, above all, the unowned dog, that brought Senator Harrison to his feet.

They looked at him in astonishment, their faces seeming to say it would have been in better taste for him to have remained seated just then.

"Mr. President," he said, pulling at his collar and looking straight ahead, "I rise to move a reconsideration."

There was a gasp, a moment of supreme quiet, and then a mighty burst of applause. To men of all parties and factions there came a single thought. Johnson was the leading county of its Congressional district. There was an election that fall, and Harrison was in the race. Those eight words meant to a surety he would not go to Washington, for the Senator from Maxwell had chosen the right word when he referred to the prejudice of Johnson County on the Williams case as "undying." The world throbs with such things at the moment of their doing—even though condemning them later, and the part of the world then packed within the Senate-Chamber shared the universal disposition.

The noise astonished Senator Harrison, and he looked around with something like resentment. When the tumult at last subsided,

and he saw that he was expected to make a speech, he grew very red, and grasped his chair desperately.

The reporters were back in their places, leaning nervously forward. This was Senator Harrison's chance to say something worth putting into a panel by itself with black lines around it—and they were sure he would do it.

But he did not. He stood there like a schoolboy who had forgotten his piece—growing more and more red. "I—I think," he finally jerked out, "that some of us have been mistaken. I'm in favor now of—of giving him his chance."

They waited for him to proceed, but after a helpless look around the Chamber he sat down. The president of the Senate waited several minutes for him to rise again, but he at last turned his chair around and looked out at the green things on the State-house grounds, and there was nothing to do but go ahead with the second calling of the roll. This time it stood 50 to 12 in favor of the boy.

A motion to adjourn immediately followed—no one wanted to do anything more that afternoon. They all wanted to say things to the Senator from Johnson; but his face had grown cold, and as they were usually afraid of him, anyhow, they kept away. All but Senator Dorman—it meant too much with him. "Do you mind my telling you," he said, tensely, "that it was as fine a thing as I have ever known a man to do?"

The Senator from Johnson moved impatiently. "You think it 'fine,' " he asked, almost resentfully, "to be a coward?"

"Coward?" cried the other man. "Well, that's scarcely the word. It was—heroic!"

"Oh no," said Senator Harrison, and he spoke wearily, "it was a clear case of cowardice. You see," he laughed, "I was afraid it would haunt me when I am seventy."

Senator Dorman started eagerly to speak, but the other man stopped him and passed on. He was seeing it as his constituency would see it, and it humiliated him. They would say he had not the courage of his convictions, that he was afraid of the unpopularity, that his judgment had fallen victim to the eloquence of the Senator from Maxwell.

But when he left the building and came out into the softness of the April afternoon it began to seem different. After all, it was not he alone who leaned to the softer side. There were the trees—they were permitted another chance to bud; there were the birds—they were allowed another chance to sing; there was the earth—to it was given another chance to yield. There stole over him a tranquil sense of unison with Life.

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



Thomas H. Cook's novels are generally bittersweet and haunting, and **The Interrogation** (Bantam, \$23.95) is no exception. A man named Albert Jay Smalls is being held for questioning in the death of a small girl, but time is running out. If the police can't get either a confession or some evidence to hold this man, they will have to release him. For one detective, a broken man whose own daughter was murdered years earlier by an unknown killer, this is totally unacceptable. For the chief, the truth of who committed this crime may force him to face some very ugly facts about his own child, a drug-addicted son whom he's never stopped loving. And for a third cop, leaving this crime unsolved would be the best thing for his career. In his methodical, mesmerizing style, Cook slowly peels back each layer of this story until the reader alone will know the shocking truths that tie all of these characters together.

Joining the ranks of survivor-turned-hero/heroine is Orla McLeod, an undercover policewoman with the Glasgow force, in Manda Scott's **No Good Deed** (Bantam, \$22.95). Scott begins her tale at a high pitch and never turns down the burner. We first meet her as she's tied up and facing certain death, unless she can coax a young, traumatized boy to help her. Later we meet Orla's mother and learn of the terrorist bomb in Ireland that killed Orla's father and young brother when Orla was a child. Then we meet her undercover team, only to add them, too, to the list of imperiled people whom we hope to see spared as we also begin to see the masterful machinations of their stalker. Gritty, unsentimental, deeply felt, and deftly plotted, *No Good Deed* will not give you a moment's rest until you've raced to the surprising conclusion.

In his second thriller, **Do No Harm** (Morrow, \$24.95), Gregg Andrew Hurwitz lines up a widowed M.D. against a woeful assailant whose pitiful mental condition makes him no less a threat. David Spier is chief of UCLA's Medical Center Emergency Room. Spier's

day at work is always about crisis, and it's too often filled with moments of heartbreak. What's left of one of the nurses' faces after a man has tossed blinding liquid lye at her, however, is worse: it is gut-wrenching. The apparently random attack is quickly followed by another, this time directed against one of David's own nurses. A medical decision made treating the prime suspect in these crimes suddenly puts the doctor in the hot seat (not to mention the media spotlight). Another attack, this time on a fellow doctor with whom Spier has a budding romance, drives him even further into the investigation. His private sleuthing reveals a shocking episode in the medical center's history that provides the context to the lye-thrower's pathology. Now Spier is driven to find the man before a vengeful cop gets to him. The medical milieu is graphic and realistic; if you like your thrillers wrapped in surgical gauze, this one's for you.

On an entirely different note, Donna Andrews has created an engaging and undeniably fresh heroine in her debut novel featuring Turing Hopper, **You've Got Murder** (Berkley, \$21.95). Turing is named after two computer pioneers, which makes sense once you learn that this novel's narrator is an AIP, short for "Artificial Intelligence Personality." Turing is actually an incredibly sophisticated (and thoroughly engaging) software program running inside a corporate software company's mainframe. Turing is also the brainchild of programmer Zack Malone and is but one of the firm's AIPs designed to act as a easy user interface to its subscription database service. Turing will be the first to tell you, however, that she's the first and probably the only AIP in her neighborhood to gain sentience. Turing lives in the computer but is free to travel widely along the internet as she pleases. When her creator Zack goes missing from his workstation, Turing turns her downtime addiction to private eye fiction into a decision to tackle her first case. Something is going on and Turing is going to find out what it is. Sidekicks in the persons of a stalwart executive secretary and a buddy in the photocopying department act as Turing's legs and fellow operatives. Much of this lively, entertaining novel's suspense comes from guessing how Turing is going to widen her search for Zack and ultimately uncover the insidious plot hatching like a virus inside the company.

Dorothy Cannell, whose *The Thin Woman* shows up on many a fan's top ten list of mysteries, brings the delightfully nosy Ellie Haskell back in **The Importance of Being Ernestine** (Viking, \$23.95). As the caper opens, Ellie's efforts to surprise her husband Ben with a makeover of his study have been rebuffed (to put it politely), and she has fled the family manse to give him time to cool off. This is how she winds up sharing a nip of whiskey with her erstwhile cleaning lady, the ever-eccentric Mrs. Malloy, in the office of a private eye for whom Mrs. Malloy is now

(continued on page 142)

THE STORY THAT WON

The April Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Matt Swartz of McLean, Virginia. Honorable mentions go to Lorna M. Kaine of Oviedo, Florida; Jennifer Davis of Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Don Van Dyke of Lawton, Oklahoma; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas;



Jan Chadwick of Cincinnati, Ohio; Roger W. Cain of Somerville, Alabama; Doc Finch of Zion, Illinois; Robert T. Lawton of Rapid City, South Dakota; Rosemary T. Fontana of Sherburne, New York; and M. K. Hasenberg of Morton Grove, Illinois.

Hulton Archives

STEP RIGHT UP by Matt Swartz

The Bugle Brothers Family Circus went bankrupt and the Flying Kovacs were struck without a safety net. Who else could want three Hungarian trapeze artists? The Kovacs had agreed on a destination: Las Vegas. Stage shows there were hiring, according to the ringmaster. But the Kovacs needed money to get out there and to live on while looking for a new gig.

Janos Kovac got an idea. Dressed in his silk jumpsuit, he would knock on doors in a rich neighborhood. Then some right lady would appear and he'd lay on the Slavic charm as thick as paprika on goulash. "I famous trapeze guy gone broke!" Janos would announce. Then he would say that he "vanted" to entertain the rich lady's guests at any backyard party she might have. "Vatch!" he would command, then perform some acrobatic feat with nearby posts, eaves, or trees. "You get cheap price! Twenty-five dollars, one-half hour."

The idea worked, but his first customer learned the real price. While Janos jumped and flipped before guests at the pool party of Mrs. Conrad Buffington, Kristof and Oszkar Kovac swung and climbed their way from the driveway into the master bedroom. There they lifted jewelry and cash, then went downstairs and raided purses. Done, the two slipped back out the window by which they had come.

Days later, after detectives figured it all out, a sign appeared in town that the Flying Kovacs thought they would never see: “Wanted: three Hungarian trapeze artists.”

(continued from page 140)

working. The two women are mistaken for investigators by the snobby matron who shows up at the P.I.'s office as a client, and thus the newly-minted detective duo accept a case involving a wronged parlor maid and a decades-old family curse. Beyond this point you must merely place yourself in the hands of Cannell, a mistress of merry mayhem, and revel unabashedly in the wildly wacky world of Ellie Haskell.

Barbara Hambly continues her notable and distinguished historical series set in nineteenth century New Orleans with **Wet Grave** (Bantam, \$23.95). Hambly's hero is Benjamin January, a free black man with exceptional abilities, courage, and character. The summer of 1835 begins with the murder of a drunken freedwoman in her miserable hut, a crime which only January appears interested in solving. All too soon, however, there is another death: the tragic murder of someone close to January. Worse, he finds himself and his lover, Rose, in mortal danger and forced to flee their lodgings. As with earlier books in this fine series, Hambly's attention to the period and its historical detail is convincing, while her colorful characters vividly step out of the pages and into the reader's consciousness. If you haven't sampled this series, you might want to start at its beginning with *A Free Man of Color*. Certainly anyone who is following the life of Benjamin January won't want to miss this installment.

Stephen Horn's hero in **Law of Gravity** (HarperCollins, \$24.95) was once a successful attorney in the Justice Department in Washington, D.C., a bright and competent man familiar with both investigative procedure and the machinations of politics. That was before the scandal that sank Philip Barkley's career, followed by the personal loss that threatened his sanity. Since returning to work, Barkley's just been taking up space in his office and everyone knows it, including himself. When a senator's aide disappears, arousing concern that the missing man has also breached national security, Barkley is amazed to find himself appointed head of the investigation. He's paired with lovely, career-minded FBI agent Blair Turner, a woman whose lack of trust in Barkley begins to chip away at his trust of her. Horn's second novel has a lot going for it: a likable protagonist, a truly memorable retiree sidekick, a wheels-within-wheels plot line, and some great action.

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Communication of a different sort is at the heart of Susan Glaspell's "The Plea," our Mystery Classic this month. Whereas gossip may bind or estrange people, in this story a persuasive appeal brings one politician to empathize and understand the actions of a tragic boy. A native Iowan, Glaspell (1876–1948) was a playwright and one of the founders of the Provincetown Players on Cape Cod. She won a Pulitzer Prize in 1931 for *Alison's House*, her play about Emily Dickenson.

New to AHMM this month is Mithran Somasundrum, author of "Four Days in April." Dr. Somasundrum is a scientist in the field of physical chemistry at Cranfield University in Middlesex in the U.K. He has lived and worked in Thailand and Japan.



Mithran Somasundrum

This is his first published mystery story, though not his first encounter with the places of mystery. He tells us, "As a student I spent one summer working at Sherlock Holmes's fictional address on Baker Street. I was disappointed to find it is a modern office block." □

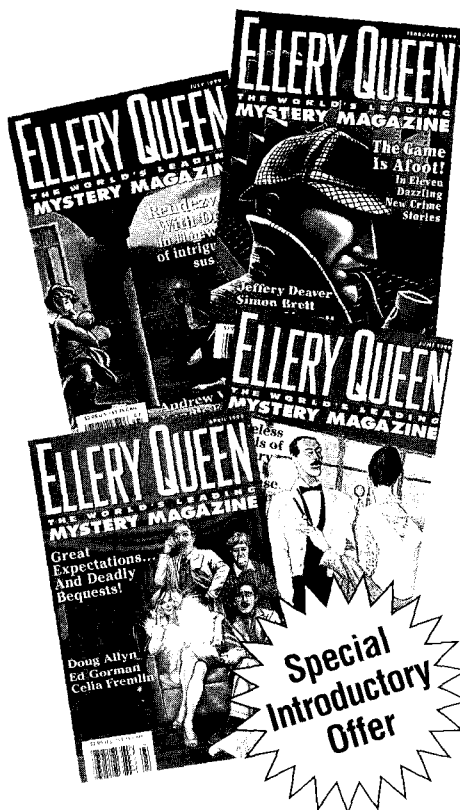
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